

Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)

Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP)

# Court Navigators Connect Justice-involved Individuals to More Than Just Treatment

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## Court Navigation to Support Behavioral Health

Many individuals who become involved in the criminal justice system struggle with untreated substance use or mental health conditions. Court systems have taken an interest in linking these individuals to treatment, but treatment uptake can be challenging for those with behavioral health conditions.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Accessing treatment requires scheduling and attending appointments, paying treatment costs or obtaining health insurance coverage, and overcoming the stigma that can accompany these conditions. For those in the justice system, these obligations are compounded by legal requirements such as court visits and probation conditions. Many individuals with behavioral health conditions have difficulty managing these types of complex and stressful activities or lack the resources to do so, meaning that they may miss out on the benefits of treatment and face even worse health and legal outcomes.

Navigation is a model that has been used in both health and legal settings to reduce barriers to treatment and significantly improve outcomes for individuals with mental health or substance use

diagnoses.<sup>4,5</sup> Court-based navigation programs are gaining in popularity in jurisdictions across the United States, designed to link justice-involved individuals to mental health and substance use treatment and improve legal outcomes such as court attendance, adherence to conditions of pretrial and probation, and recidivism.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup> A “court-based navigator” has been defined as “a person who is in a position to help meet both limited legal-related needs by providing guidance and information related to court processes and behavioral health, economic, and social service-related needs by providing connections to community-based resources.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to making referrals to behavioral health treatment providers, a court-based navigator may provide support by identifying housing and transportation resources, calling a client to remind them of a court or therapy visit, or helping set up a plan for restitution payments, among other things. These types of assistance are beneficial to both individuals and courts: individuals access treatment to improve their symptoms and help meet legal obligations, and court systems increase efficiency by avoiding missed court dates and probation



revocations.<sup>11</sup> Court navigators may be employed by a county or jurisdiction, behavioral health agency, or state agency. Court navigation models have been implemented in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and illustrate different ways in which court navigators can be used to promote treatment for individuals in court settings.

## Projects NORTH and Weber/RENEW

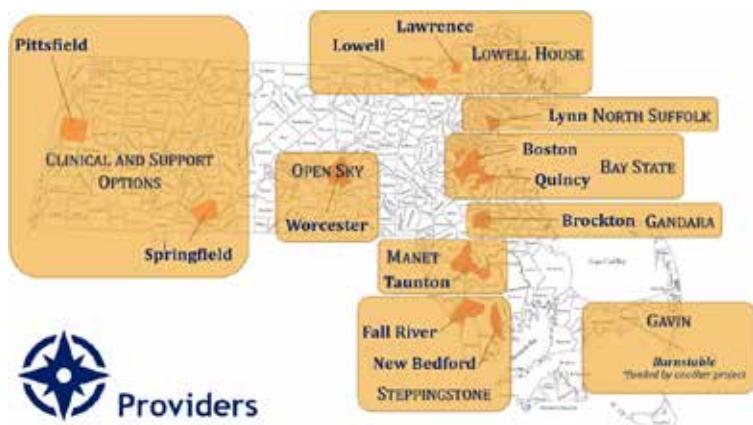
One statewide model is Project NORTH (Navigation, Outreach, Recovery, Treatment, and Hope), a recovery support navigator program established by the Massachusetts Trial Court in 2020 that currently provides navigators in 13 jurisdictions across the state and will soon be expanding to 3 more. Project NORTH seeks to increase access to evidence-based treatment and care coordination, reduce barriers to treatment retention, and increase access to overdose prevention, education, and naloxone. The cornerstone of the program is support provided to individuals through recovery support navigators who are employed and clinically supervised by local behavioral health agencies. For example, the navigator serving the Lowell District Court in Lowell, Massachusetts, is employed by Lowell House Addiction Treatment and Recovery, a behavioral health agency providing inpatient and outpatient substance use treatment services in that community. The Trial Court contracts

with behavioral health agencies to employ the navigators, and the Project NORTH program manager (a licensed clinical social worker) provides the navigators with court-based and clinical supervision. (See map below.)

Another court navigator program, in Rhode Island, supports courts in partnership with Project Weber/RENEW, a nonprofit organization that provides peer-led harm reduction and recovery support services, such as street outreach, drop-in centers, case management, and linkages to basic needs such as housing, food, and health care. The program employs one court support coordinator based in the Sixth District Court, who provides navigation services within and outside of the court and draws on Project Weber/RENEW staff members and services to support clients. Court support coordination began in Rhode Island in February 2022.

## Intervening Early With Treatment and Services

Navigators provide a variety of services based on the needs of court users and their families, and the two programs mentioned above have some overlap in the types of services they provide but diverge in others. Both sites provide rapid linkage to behavioral health treatment. Significant delays are common when people are trying to access mental health or substance use treatment and can result in loss of interest, discouragement, or worsening of their conditions during the process. Project NORTH Program Manager Judy Bazinet said, "It's so scary for clients to decide they want to begin treatment, and so we need to intervene as early as we can, while they are still willing and motivated." Navigators minimize delays in the referral process by developing relationships with local treatment providers in the community and using those



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—Project NORTH specialty court administrator

relationships to connect individuals to services that are the most appropriate and most quickly available.

At Project NORTH, navigators are employed by treatment agencies themselves and are located in the courthouse. Specialty Courts Administrator Sheila Casey explained that the swift linkage provided by Project NORTH is appealing to other court actors: “Probation officers and specialty court coordinators all spend a lot of time on the phone trying to get a bed for someone. And if we have someone who works for a treatment program that is already in their system, they know when the beds are available, and that saves everybody a lot of time.”

Unfortunately, the lack of adequate behavioral health treatment services in both states means that many clients experience long delays in accessing treatment. Tarah Dorsey, the Rhode Island navigator, described, “If there’s not an opening, then the person is left just

hoping and wishing and waiting that they don’t have a recurrence.” While they are waiting, Mx. Dorsey does their best to provide support through personal contact and by



Project Weber/RENEW drop-in centers are safe spaces for those in recovery.

referring clients to Project Weber/RENEW’s drop-in centers, safe spaces where they can avoid dangerous situations and find support from others: “They have TVs. They can draw. They can sit there and have lunch, snacks, talk to each other . . . the drop-in centers are packed every day . . . This is their safe place.” If an opening at a treatment center is not immediately available, navigators in both programs make referrals and connect clients to care in the meantime.

Navigators from both programs also provide services that facilitate clients’ access to and retention in treatment. They assist clients in enrolling in health insurance that will cover the cost of treatment, a process that can be lengthy and confusing without assistance. Mx. Dorsey explained, regarding health insurance enrollment, “It’s not a hard process, but sometimes to them it’s hard, because they’re going through so much and they don’t know where to begin. They don’t know the resources. So that’s where we come in—we know the resources.” Both programs also provide clients with information on where to obtain naloxone and overdose prevention education; the Rhode Island navigator even provides naloxone directly to court staff and clients within the courthouse.

One of the most popular services provided by Project NORTH navigators is the provision of lists of local community resources that can support clients with ancillary needs, such as food and employment. These resource lists are shared with clients but also with

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attorneys, court staff members, and other service providers who find them helpful in their own work with clients. Ms. Bazinet described, “We have resource guides that we pass out, and the attorneys love those—they’re like gold . . . that’s a lifesaver if you don’t have to do all that research.” Project NORTH navigators frequently spend time updating their resource guides because the landscape of treatment and recovery can change very quickly as new programs open and others are discontinued. In Rhode Island, the court navigator relies on their extensive knowledge of local resources to connect clients with resources, knowledge that comes both from building relationships across the community and from the navigator’s own lived experience of recovery and court involvement.

Aside from court-based navigation, linkage to housing, particularly sober housing where clients can live rent-free for a short time while in recovery, is a main component of both programs. Sober housing can improve clients’ chances of succeeding in treatment and fulfilling their legal responsibilities. Ms. Casey from Project NORTH reported, “Housing in particular, it’s super expensive. So if you can offer someone some stability . . . they can live in a sober home rent-free . . . they can *focus* on their recovery, which is way more than enough . . . They can work to get their license reinstated, they can do job skills, they can do intensive outpatient programs, they can connect with a psychiatrist and get stable on medication, so there’s so much that can happen in a short time that puts them in the best possible place to succeed while they save money and do what they need to do.”

Certified sober housing services are directly contracted by Project NORTH and have been hugely popular and have helped get the word out about the program, especially in its Boston location, where housing is

particularly scarce and expensive. However, the demand for sober housing has occasionally exceeded the number of beds available in the facilities contracted by the program, and it has had to reduce the number of rent-free months it provides clients.

## Responding to Local Needs

One area where the two programs diverge somewhat is in the breadth of their services. Whereas Project NORTH has devoted significant resources to connecting clients to sober housing because of large demand for that service, Mx. Dorsey in Rhode Island provides a variety of personal and direct services and support to clients that are not (at first glance) directly related to behavioral health treatment but have arisen as priorities in their population. For example, Mx. Dorsey attends court with clients when they need support or assistance with understanding complex proceedings. They said, “A lot of people go to court and they don’t understand anything that the judge just said . . . Court can be a scary place. So I’ll go and just sit with them if I have to.” Mx. Dorsey recounted other types of help they provided clients, including connecting with rent relief, helping enroll a client’s child in school, finding an agency that supports victims of police brutality, and drawing on relationships with bail bondsmen to negotiate bail payments. They explained, “Whatever I have to do to help someone, I’m going to do it. If I don’t have the resources, if my agency can’t do it, I’ll bring you to an agency that can.”

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—Project Weber/RENEW court navigator

Expungement of criminal records was an unexpected need that Mx. Dorsey discovered by providing navigation through the Rhode Island court system for clients and quickly developed into Project Weber/RENEW's most popular service. Sometimes, individuals' criminal records can stand in the way of the services they need to access for recovery, particularly housing and employment. Mx. Dorsey noticed that it was expensive for clients to obtain assistance from attorneys to expunge charges from their records, and so Mx. Dorsey learned how to apply for expungements from law clerks at the courthouse. "Their record is stopping them from getting an apartment, from getting subsidized or low-income housing; it's stopping them from getting a job. So we do the expungement, see the judge, the judge grants the expungement, and they go on and do what they need to do. It's what I do the most is expungements."

Transportation is another need among clients in both navigation programs, and the programs' responses have varied based on local resources. Project Weber/RENEW has three vans and an outreach team that it uses to provide clients with rides to appointments, court, and other services in Rhode Island; clients can also access the Providence bus line, which is free. Project NORTH aims to provide clients with short-term transportation assistance to help them get from the courthouse to treatment or related service appointments, but figuring out how to provide transportation in some areas in Massachusetts has been challenging; Ms. Casey and Ms. Bazinet refer to their transportation services as "a work in progress." The behavioral treatment agencies that employ Project NORTH's recovery support navigators have grant funding to provide transportation to their clients, but transportation resources are limited to whatever those agencies have available—some may call taxis or Ubers or may be able to rely on public transit, but some

areas, such as Pittsfield, are so rural that public transit and rideshare services are less available.

## Navigators Promote Visibility and Trust

Key to the success of both navigator programs is the visibility of both clients and staff members in the courtroom and the trust of clients who need services. Both programs receive referrals from a variety of sources, including attorneys, judges, law clerks, probation staff, law enforcement, and even bail bondsmen in Rhode Island. They also receive self-referrals.

Project NORTH recovery support navigators promote visibility by conducting outreach sessions with court actors to explain the program and by positioning themselves visibly in the courtroom. Navigators initiate conversations with courthouse staff members and clients and even set up tables in the courtroom lobby with sandwich boards reading "Ask me about substance use treatment and recovery. No judgment, no stigma." In Rhode Island courts, Mx. Dorsey interacts regularly with court actors to inform them about Project Weber/RENEW. Both sites



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rely heavily on word of mouth to spread knowledge of their programs among clients and their communities.

Promoting client trust is another key determinant of success in behavioral health programs, and the two programs have intentionally worked to promote trust and, in some ways, distance themselves from the punitive image of the court system. Both programs utilize navigators who are employed not by the court system but by local harm reduction (Rhode Island) and behavioral health care (Massachusetts) agencies. Project NORTH recovery support navigators are employed by behavioral health agencies that were selected based on their records of quality and competence, and their role is emphasized as being separate from the court. Ms. Casey explained, “We want people to trust these navigators, and they’re not going to trust them if they think they work for the court, that they’re turning around and telling their probation officer that he used drugs last night. This was very intentional . . . . We are essentially giving the treatment provider an office inside the court, and the minute somebody opens that door and walks in, they’ve left the court building and they’re in [the provider’s] office.” If navigators need to communicate about clients with court staff members, they are required to submit a release of information.

In Rhode Island, the Project Weber/RENEW court navigator position was purposefully filled by an individual with lived experience in recovery and the

court system. As Mx. Dorsey describes, “I’m a person with lived experience. I’m in recovery myself. So that helps. I’m a person who has been through the court system, in the same courthouse where I’m working now. So it makes people feel more comfortable when you say ‘I’ve been here, I’ve done this.’” Project NORTH also employs some navigators with lived experience, which enhances trust and promotes understanding between the clients and the navigators.

Court-based navigation is an increasingly popular model that may improve health and legal outcomes for individuals in a variety of Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) contexts. These innovative programs in Rhode Island and Massachusetts show that there are multiple ways to integrate navigation into a court system and that a wide variety of services are helpful in improving justice-involved individuals’ access to behavioral health care.

## Endnotes

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Visit the COSSUP Resource Center at [www.cossup.org](http://www.cossup.org).

## About RTI International

RTI International serves a dual role in COSSUP. The RTI team provides direct support to state agencies and subrecipients, making communities safer by promoting evidence-based practices to respond to drug misuse across all government levels. Through its substantive, methodological, and technical expertise, RTI and its partners foster peer-to-peer learning and cross-site coordination to enable discussions of lessons learned, facilitate program improvements, and promote evidence-based program proliferation—providing tailored training and technical assistance (TTA) for the unique needs of jurisdictions that can also be applied nationally.

The RTI team also provides individualized TTA to grantees to effectively address needs of pretrial, prosecution, defense counsel, and court actors in serving individuals with substance use and co-occurring mental health disorders during the pretrial and court adjudication processes. RTI creates thorough, user-friendly, practitioner-focused toolkits and resources to support best and equitable practices in the implementation of diversion programs.

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