

Client Choice Pilot Project

Overview

The Iowa State Public Defender and the Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning (CJJJ) have partnered to conduct an innovative pilot project to study the impact of client choice in indigent defense. The project is funded by a federal Bureau of Justice Statistics program and facilitated by CJJP, Iowa's Statistical Analysis Center. Funding for the project began in October of 2016 and will continue through September of 2019.

This project seeks to determine whether allowing indigent defendants to select their attorney as opposed to random assignment will affect client satisfaction, case outcomes, and/or cost. The Public Defender's Office selected Plymouth and Monona as pilot counties with the support of the chief judge in that district. When it was determined that case volume was not high enough to gather meaningful data, Woodbury county was added to the project.

Baseline data was gathered over a total of fourteen (14) months, and 1,413 separate cases were reviewed. Cases analyzed included all indigent defense cases concluding during the 14-month period and encompassed cases handled by the State Public Defender's Office and by contract attorneys. Data collection for the baseline study was threefold:

1. Surveys were sent to each indigent defendant to gather information about client satisfaction with their attorney, representation, and case outcome (217 surveys returned);
2. Case outcomes were analyzed to determine objective measures from cases, i.e. length of case, length of pre-trial detention, number of attorney changes, whether charges were reduced, discretionary sentencing conditions imposed; and
3. Cost of representation.

Now that baseline data has been collected, the next phase of the project will be to implement client choice. In order to conduct this part of the project, contract attorneys for the three (3) pilot counties will be placed into a selection book along with professional information for clients to review. Clients will select their own attorney from the book, and cases will proceed in the usual manner. The same data will be collected during the client choice phase as was collected during the baseline phase of the project.

At the conclusion of the project, a report will set forth the findings of the study, including any measurable differences in:

- Client satisfaction
- Cost of representation
- Case outcomes including pleas, dismissals, trials, reduced charges, length of pre-trial detention, bond amounts and reductions, length of case, length of jail or prison sentence, length of probation, amount of fine or civil penalty, type of sentence (deferred, suspended, consecutive, concurrent, etc.), discretionary sentencing conditions (drug court, residential treatment, electronic monitoring, etc.), number of attorneys per case, and client requests for a new attorney