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## *RELAPSE PREVENTION COURT ANNUAL REPORT*

*March 2023 to March 2024*

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Relapse Prevention Court (RPC) is a voluntary program approved by the Board of Judges in March 2018 as an initiative to assist individuals with significant drug use histories and risk of relapse upon their release from federal custody.<sup>1</sup> The ongoing oversight by a probation officer who specializes in the field of drug treatment, as well as regular contact with a judicial officer, is intended to provide optimal services and resources for participants in recovery.

From the release of our last report in March 2023, through March 2024, the program has continued with its interdisciplinary team, and participants in various phases and stages of recovery, gathering every other week on alternate Wednesdays.<sup>2</sup> In 2023 and through the first quarter of 2024, there were twelve active participants. Six individuals graduated from the program and were honored in three graduation ceremonies, held in April and July 2023, and in January 2024.

This year RPC explored expanding the participant pool to include individuals at a higher risk of relapse, expand use of peer-based services, and develop staff through national training.

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### *RECOVERY SUPPORT THROUGH TESTING AND TREATMENT*

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In that the focus of our program is relapse prevention and abstinence from drug use, participants are obligated to submit to random drug testing. Among the twelve participants actively engaged in the program during this period, we administered 136 drug tests. We also screened for alcohol use, which is prohibited in certain cases by special condition based on the participant's history of alcohol use. We administered sixty-seven breathalyzer tests, sixty-four of those tests were negative. All but two of the 136 urine samples collected in 2023 and the first quarter of 2024 were negative for the use of controlled and prohibited substances. It is important to note that the low number of positive tests does not reflect the total level of use. In one instance, testing was paused due to the individual admitting to methamphetamine use. We responded with

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive description of RPC, which details the genesis, organization, and administration of the program, is on the Eastern District of Pennsylvania website: <https://www.paed.uscourts.gov/relapse-prevention-court>.

<sup>2</sup> For the year 2023, the team members include the Honorable David Strawbridge, the Honorable Jeffrey Schmehl, and the Honorable Craig Straw, Assistant U.S. Attorneys Mary Theresa Soltis and Joseph LaBar, Senior U.S. Probation Officer/Drug Treatment Specialist Katie Quinlan, Intensive Supervision Specialist Jeremy Carrion, Supervisory Probation Officer Julia Roberts, Supervisory Probation Officer Valerie Riedel, Assistant Federal Defenders Natasha Taylor-Smith, Anna Kessler, and Mara Meehan, Department of Justice (DOJ) Reentry Coordinator Mia Lamb, Paralegal Specialist Claudia Deitch, Law Clerks Erin Hills and Jenise Rivera, and Deputy Clerk Danielle Puchon and Donna Croce. We also acknowledge the support and helpful interest from Chief Probation Officer Jana Law and Third Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Theodore McKee.

court guidance and placement with behavioral health services, ultimately the participant chose to withdraw from the program and enter inpatient treatment.

Treatment remains a primary focus for participants. Counseling services are delivered to participants through a variety of providers in the community. Providers include: The Northeast Treatment Center (NET), Rehab After Work, PATH, The Wedge, VA, JFK Behavioral Health, Courage Medicine, Bowling Green Behavioral Health, and the Council for Relationships. Treatment is delivered in accordance with clinical standards, by licensed clinical providers, and at no cost to participants. Access to care and coverage is normally available through Medicaid. However, if an individual did not have Medicaid or other health insurance benefits, the U.S. Probation Office covers the cost of services at approved vendors. Treatment modalities for participants include cognitive behavioral therapy, psychiatric care and, if indicated, medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD). Participants received counseling on an outpatient basis which includes individual or group formats based upon the recommendation of clinical providers. Participants have also proactively chosen to return to counseling when handling stressful life events. For instance, one participant voluntarily sought counseling services after the death of a coworker.

Throughout the year, we have encouraged the use of peer support through attendance of AA and NA meetings as well as sponsorship. Two participants noted significant support provided through their sponsor relationships. In addition, both individuals included peer support/contacting their sponsor in their five step trigger response plans. Through his work with The Philadelphia Anti- Drug/Anti- Violence Network (PAAN), one individual was able to connect with other participants to provide RPC peer support and information on community involvement initiatives.

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### *COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS*

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RPC has been fortunate to share the resources and community partners that were established through the Supervision to Aid Reentry (STAR) Court. All participants received public benefit screenings upon intake with the DOJ Reentry Coordinator and Paralegal Specialist on the team. Additionally, emergency assistance funds are available to participants through the Luongo Fund.<sup>3</sup> All participants are screened for benefits eligibility. One participant received resume assistance from law clerk volunteers. Three participants received legal aid to resolve traffic violations and outstanding debts. Numerous other referrals were made to various partners by our Re-Entry Coordinators to assist with employment, college enrollment, family therapy, physical fitness, and housing. More referrals and resources were deployed as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> District Court Judge Gerald A. McHugh established a fund (also a 501(c)(3)) initially dedicated to supporting the STAR re-entry programs. In 2018, the fund was extended to help support RPC and our district's STRIDES mental health court. The fund is dedicated to Judge McHugh's mentor, former Chief Judge Alfred L. Luongo. The fund is administered by the Philadelphia Bar Foundation. Money is used to assist participants with emergency expenses, such as housing deposits, education, and other costs that cannot be paid with Second Chance Act funds.



**FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

*Conducted in partnership with the Temple University Fox School of Business*

- Credit report assistance
- Money management
- Developing Business Plans

*Conducted in Partnership with the Consumer Bankruptcy Assistance Project*

- Understanding tax forms
- Completing 2022 tax returns



**BENEFITS SCREENING, RESUME ASSISTANCE & RE-ENTRY NEEDS**

- Re-Entry Law Clerk Volunteers assisted with resume review and applications for Compass medical/food benefits.
- Individuals also received help with birth certificates, social security cards, photo IDs, and voter registration.



**LEGAL ASSISTANCE**

*Conducted with the assistance of Volunteer Law Clerks*

- Resolving ignition interlock fines and driver license restoration
- Power of Attorney for aging parents
- Living will for parents and participant
- Legal name change for a child



**EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE**

*Conducted in partnership with Community College of Philadelphia*

- *I Am More* Reentry program at Community College of Philadelphia offered scholarships and free resources
- The Reentry Clinic Third Circuit education and tutoring team provided GED tutoring
- Community Partner, PAAN hired a participant to work as a community advocate

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**RPC PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

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In November 2023, the U.S. Probation team members participated in, and the Hon. Craig M. Straw attended, the National Association of Drug Court Professionals RISE 2023 national conference in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Upon return from training, the team received a training

that included a review of updated evidence-based practices. Based on the guidance and ideas from RISE, the team is exploring growth in accordance with evidence-based practices.

RPC is now in its sixth year. Since its approval to be a pilot program in 2018, the program has committed itself to providing compassionate, evidence-based services for individuals in initial re-entry recovering from substance use disorders. In 2023, we began internal dialog regarding possible expansion of the participant pool. All participants have maintained a lengthy period of sobriety by the time they enter the program, whether it is due to incarceration or participation in programming (mostly inpatient). Goals for the future include expanding participant qualifications to include individuals that have shorter periods of sobriety or are closer to active addiction. Many of these individuals are already being supervised and qualify for the program, but for the length of their sobriety. RPC believes that the resources, support, and community RPC provides its participants would be beneficial to and assist individuals at a higher risk for relapse. The RPC team has begun identifying individuals suitable for the expansion and has begun extending the opportunity to join the program. RPC remains committed to assisting individual with long-term recovery, promoting inclusivity, and building a supportive community.

cc: All EDPA District Court Judges  
All EDPA Magistrate Judges  
Manuel Jimenez, Chief, U.S Probation  
Jonathan Henshaw, Deputy Chief, U.S. Probation  
Jacqueline C. Romero, U.S. Attorney  
Lisa Evans Lewis, Chief, Federal Defender Association  
Eric Gartner, U.S. Marshal  
George Wylesol, Clerk of Court  
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