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# A Resource Guide on Court Navigator Programs: Providing Connections and Support Across the Legal and Behavioral Health Systems

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# Introduction

Many people who become involved in the criminal legal system experience behavioral health and social service-related needs that remain unmet throughout their system involvement. These unmet needs can result in people cycling through the system,<sup>1</sup> which takes a toll on their well-being and places an unnecessary burden on the system.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Many people also need assistance navigating the legal process itself; some only need minimal aid while others require more substantial support. For example, some people may require assistance from government agencies, community organizations, and service providers, but finding the necessary connections—while meeting their legal obligations—can be challenging. Without these connections, their cases can stall, increasing the length and cost of case processing for the courts, and their needs can be exacerbated resulting in further legal involvement.

Court navigator programs represent one strategy to address these unmet needs and provide support to people involved in the criminal legal system. While programs operate differently, they generally follow a similar process and provide similar services. Through these programs, court-involved people can meet with navigators, ask questions about the court process, and discuss their circumstances and needs. Following this initial discussion, a navigator might provide directions or information related to the courthouse or facilitate a connection to court- or community-based resources. Some navigators also provide services directly such as crisis management or brief counseling sessions. The overarching goals of court navigator programs are to help people successfully navigate their court involvement, connect them to resources that meet their needs, and reduce their likelihood of further court involvement.

From 2022–2023, Policy Research Associates (PRA) researchers completed a national scan of court navigator programs and found 18 programs located across 21 different states.<sup>5</sup> These programs vary in reach, structure, scope, daily operations, and exact services provided. To learn more, download the [\*National Compendium of Court Navigation\*](#)



*Programs.* Following the national scan, PRA researchers conducted site visits and interviews with five programs to gain a greater understanding of the structure and operations of each program and to learn about the programs via the opinions and experiences of the navigators, the people who work with navigators, and the people who have received services from the navigators.

This guide summarizes the findings of these site visits and interviews. In the following sections, we provide an overview of our methodology, identify the purpose and organization of the guide, describe the five court navigator programs, and offer key takeaways for other jurisdictions that may be interested in implementing court navigator programs.

# Methodology

## Procedures

Between November 2023 and May 2024, a team of three PRA researchers completed site visits to five court navigator programs and interviewed people involved with the programs in various roles at each site. The five programs included:

1. The Court Navigator in Buncombe County, North Carolina
2. The Court Clinician in Chesterfield County, Virginia
3. The Social Work and Court Navigators in Franklin County, Ohio
4. Recovery Support Navigators with Project NORTH in Massachusetts
5. Criminal Justice Liaisons in Tennessee

## Site Visits

We completed in-person site visits to four programs and a virtual site visit to one program, each lasting one to three days. Site visit activities included tours of courthouses, jails, and community-based service provider agencies. During in-person visits, we also observed court navigators' daily activities, court proceedings, and courthouse common areas (e.g., lobbies, main hallways, resource centers). Throughout these activities, we took detailed field notes for analysis purposes.

## Interviews

We conducted some interviews in person during site visits and others virtually before and after visits. For four programs, we interviewed each participant individually. For one program, we conducted interviews in the context of focus groups, with separate focus groups for each role type; specifically, we conducted a navigator focus group, a court actor focus group, a service provider focus group, and a lived experience focus group. In total, we interviewed 93 people across the five programs. Table 1 displays interviews across programs and roles.

**Table 1. Number of Interviews Conducted for Each Program**

Program Location	Interviewees					
	Location	Court Navigator	Court Actors	Jail Actors	Other County Actors	Service Providers
Buncombe County, NC	1	5	-	4	2	2
Chesterfield County, VA	1	8	-	-	4	3
Franklin County, OH	4	4	-	-	1	8
Massachusetts	14	6	-	-	5	2
Tennessee	5	1	6	-	4	3

Note. Court actors include clerks, assistants, pretrial services staff, prosecution and defense attorneys, judges, and magistrates. Jail actors include nurses, administrators, managers, and others. Other county actors include people in administrative roles or affiliated with the sheriff’s office.

The court navigator, court actor, jail staff, and service provider interviews ranged in length from about 10 to 60 minutes. We followed a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions about the goal of navigation services, program structure, eligibility and target population, referral and intake, navigator roles and responsibilities, program completion, challenges to service provision, record keeping, experiences with the navigators, and opinions of the navigators.

Interviews with people who had received services were intentionally short to minimize the burden of participation in the study and to limit discussion to their experience with the court navigator. These interviews lasted about five to 15 minutes. Though short, we still followed a semi-structured interview protocol during these interviews that included questions about a person’s experiences in court and with the court navigator.

We gave interviewees the opportunity to share any additional relevant information and offered a \$25 gift card as compensation for their time. We recorded most interviews, with permission, and transcribed the



interviews for analysis. Three interviews were not recorded, but field notes were taken during and after for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

We implemented a combination of deductive and inductive thematic coding procedures for data analysis.<sup>6</sup> First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading through the interview transcripts. Next, we generated initial codes capturing topics that arose in the interviews. We discussed and combined the codes to form our codebook. Using our shared codebook, we each coded the same interview separately to ensure we were consistent in how we interpreted the information. We compared our codes, examined discrepancies, and revised the codebook. We each independently coded the remaining interviews. After coding all the interviews, we created analytic memos about each code in which we identified patterns and themes that occurred across interviews. Last, we reviewed the themes together as a team to develop a coherent picture of each program based on the experiences and perspectives of the people we interviewed.

## Purpose

This Resource Guide provides an in-depth look at five different models of court navigator programs. In doing so, our intent is to provide courts with information they can use to develop and implement new court navigator programs or to expand existing programs. We intentionally describe programs that vary in structure and scope, so courts can consider different models for delivering court navigation services and select a model that may work best in their jurisdiction. We focus on process primarily, describing the perspectives of those involved in court navigation programs in various roles; we do not speak to impact or effectiveness in achieving program goals. Even so, this guide can help inform the development and implementation of programs in any jurisdiction across the United States.

# Organization of Resource Guide


In this Resource Guide, we first provide brief overviews of each court navigator program. We then provide detailed program descriptions based on our site visits and interviews. In these descriptions, we adopt the title used locally rather than using the term ‘court navigator.’ Descriptions include four main topic areas:

1. **Overview:** Broad descriptions of the court navigator program and role.
2. **Needs Considered:** The needs addressed by the court navigator.
3. **Process:** The steps followed from referral to connection to services to follow-up.
4. **Benefits:** The perceived benefits of the court navigator program to the court and to the people within it.

Within each topic area, we discuss the themes that arose most frequently during interviews and present exemplifying quotes from the interview participants.

Each program description is based on the perspectives of the court navigators, the people with whom they work in the courthouse and the community, and the people they have served. Descriptions represent the views of the people interviewed and are intended to provide a broad view of each program from their perspectives. The exact content of program descriptions varies slightly based on the themes that arose within each program.

Following the program descriptions, we share a summary of findings from our site visits and interviews organized into two subsections: 1) takeaways, and 2) lessons learned. Both subsections are synthesized across programs. In the takeaways subsection, we summarize aspects of structure and approach that were mentioned by interviewees across programs, suggesting they may be key to success. In the lessons learned subsection, we discuss ways the court navigator programs may be improved or expanded to enhance daily operations or increase program reach and effectiveness, as described by interviewees.



We conclude the Resource Guide with final reflections on the five court navigator programs and the next step that is necessary to support the implementation of additional programs. We end with quotes from interview participants, illustrating their perspectives on the value of court navigator programs.

# Overview of Court Navigator Programs

## Court Navigator—Buncombe County, North Carolina

In Buncombe County, North Carolina, a single court navigator offers services to anyone coming into the Buncombe County Courthouse. The navigator is employed by Goodwill Industries International Inc., but works in the courthouse full-time. He has a desk just past the main courthouse entrance and provides most services in the lobby. Services include answering questions, providing directions to get around the courthouse, and connecting people to resources available in the courthouse and in the community. In general, the navigator's interactions with people are brief. He does not collect information or engage in any follow-ups. For these reasons, the Buncombe County court navigator represents a **light-engagement, single-navigator model** of court navigation.

## Court Clinician—Chesterfield County, Virginia

In Chesterfield County, Virginia, a single court clinician offers services to anyone coming into the Chesterfield General District Court, with a focus on those with mental health needs. The clinician is employed by Chesterfield Behavioral Health but works in the courthouse full-time. He has an office near the court entrance in the same hallway as the General District courtrooms. The clinician answers people's questions and addresses concerns they may have about the court process. He also meets with people to help them comply with court-ordered treatment, connects them to behavioral health providers in the community, and provides direct therapeutic interventions himself, as he is a Licensed Professional Counselor. The frequency of interactions with people varies. He may meet with a person once or repeatedly over several weeks or months. The clinician also collaborates with court actors by conducting mental health evaluations or consulting on behavioral health factors relevant to a case. In this way, the Chesterfield County court clinician represents a **heavy-engagement, single-navigator model** of court navigation that emphasizes mental health needs and collaboration with court actors.

## Social Work and Court Navigators—Franklin County, Ohio

In Franklin County, Ohio, one social work navigator and three court navigators offer services for anyone coming to eviction court within the Franklin County Municipal Court. All navigators are court-employed and have a table located at the entrance to the eviction court floor and a private office on that floor. They spend most of their time providing services in the lobby and hallway outside the eviction courtrooms. The social work navigator is a licensed social worker and primarily provides crisis counseling in the courthouse and connects people to resources in the community. The court navigators primarily direct people around the eviction court floor, answer questions about the court process, and connect people to resources available in the courthouse. The social work navigator typically interacts with people once to provide crisis counseling, discuss needs, and connect people to community resources. She does not specifically engage in follow-ups, though she invites people to contact her again if needed. The court navigator's interactions with people are brief. They do not collect information or engage in any follow-ups. In this way, the Franklin County navigators represent a **light-engagement, multi-navigator model** of court navigation.

## Recovery Support Navigators—Massachusetts

In Massachusetts, 14 recovery support navigators provide services in 12 counties across the state. The Navigators operate in District, Juvenile, Probate & Family, Superior, Housing, and Boston Municipal Courts. Generally, each navigator is assigned to one county. They provide services to anyone coming into the courts with a focus on those with substance use needs. The navigators are employed by behavioral health agencies and work full-time in courthouses or community resource centers. In courthouses, they have tables in highly visible areas and a private space to hold meetings. Navigators answer people's questions and concerns about the court process and connect them with behavioral health, housing, and social service-related resources in the community. Typically, navigators have an initial meeting with a person and then follow up twice to ensure the person is successfully

connected to resources. Navigators may additionally meet with a person multiple times over several weeks or months when necessary to ensure connection to services. The navigators may also collaborate with court actors by providing them with information on the status of a person's receipt of treatment if the person has given them permission to do so. In this way, the Massachusetts recovery support navigators represent a **moderate-engagement, single-navigator model** of court navigation that emphasizes substance use needs and some collaboration with court actors.

## **Criminal Justice Liaisons—Tennessee**

In Tennessee, 34 criminal justice liaisons provide services in all 95 counties across the state. The liaisons work in criminal, municipal, county, and circuit courthouses and in county jails. Generally, each Liaison is assigned to a few counties. They provide services for anyone involved in the legal system, focusing on those with mental health needs. Employed by behavioral health agencies, the liaisons travel between courthouses, jails, and community locations throughout the week rather than being stationed in one place. Liaisons meet with people to discuss their needs and connect them with behavioral health, housing, and social service-related resources in the community. The liaisons frequently engage with people incarcerated in jail to assist in developing a release plan that includes connection to treatment and supports successful integration into the community. Liaisons typically meet with a person just one time, though they may meet repeatedly over several weeks or months when necessary to ensure connection to services. The liaisons may also collaborate with jail and court actors by providing them with information on the status of a person's treatment receipt. In this way, the Tennessee criminal justice liaisons represent a **moderate-engagement, single-navigator model** of court navigation that emphasizes mental health needs and jail release planning.

# Descriptions of Individual Programs

## Court Navigator—Buncombe County, North Carolina



### OVERVIEW

In Buncombe County, there is a single court navigator who offers services for anyone coming into the courthouse. The current navigator has been in the position for about a year. He spends most of his time providing services for people in and around the courthouse lobby. In this section, we describe the court navigator's goals, onboarding process, general workflow, and referral networks.

### Goals

The court navigator described having four main goals:

1. being a welcoming presence in the courthouse
2. providing direction
3. pointing people to services in the courthouse and the community
4. informing people about the court reminder system

The court navigator aims to meet these goals by providing a light touch and trusting that, once he points someone to another entity within the court or a community resource, their needs will be met by that source. Further, he expressed hope that people walk away from interactions with him feeling clarity and perhaps even relief about their time in the courthouse. Other court personnel echoed the goal of being a friendly, non-law enforcement presence that is available immediately upon entering the courthouse to answer questions or provide direction. One person from a community agency summarized the goals this way:





I think the goal is really just to make a process that is really complicated the tiniest bit easier for the people that are in very vulnerable states and need a little bit of extra help. ... I think it applies to everyone walking into the building, whether they have a court date themselves, or like I said, whether they're a lawyer, whether they're an advocate, whether they're trying to get custody or something. It is taking one of the most stressful environments that we have in our society and making it just a little bit kinder, a little bit nicer, a little bit easier to navigate.

## **Onboarding Process**

There are no specific degree requirements for the court navigator position. Rather, the hiring committee focused on finding a candidate who displayed a strong ability to connect and empathize with people in stressful situations and calmly provide them with support. The current navigator did not have a background in the criminal legal system, something he views as a benefit. He remembers the feeling of stepping into the courthouse for the first time and uses this to help him understand how others might feel when they come to him for support. Additionally, being bilingual is not a requirement for the position, but both navigators who have held the role have been bilingual in English and Spanish.

The court navigator position is funded through a grant awarded to the county and employed through Goodwill Industries International Inc. Two people supervise the navigator: one from Goodwill and one from the courthouse. While the navigator does participate in some Goodwill company activities (e.g., team meetings, training events, supervision), he spends most of his time at the courthouse. Upon hiring, the navigator completed the standard Goodwill orientation process, which included training on the wide range of services offered by Goodwill. The navigator also completed an orientation with the court that included spending three weeks touring the courthouse and meeting court staff and other

court actors (e.g., attorneys and judges). The navigator also observed court hearings and spent time walking around the building to become familiar with the layout.

The current court navigator did not have the opportunity to shadow the previous navigator during onboarding. However, the previous navigator developed documentation on the role (e.g., frequently asked questions, a court staff directory, and a list of court-related terms translated into Spanish) and created a contact form used to track interactions with people. This documentation provided background information that helped the new navigator step into the position. Overall, the navigator described the onboarding process as being valuable to his ability to prepare for the role.

## **Workflow**

The court navigator position is characterized by a great deal of flexibility. For example, rather than following a script or standard protocol when interacting with people, the navigator is free to uniquely engage each person. The only limitation of the navigator's interactions is that he cannot provide legal aid or advice. The navigator also has flexibility in how he spends his time. While there are set hours during which the navigator must be stationed in the lobby, there are also times when the court is less busy, and the navigator is free to engage in other activities. This autonomy allows the navigator to pursue some of his specific interests related to improving people's experience with the courthouse. Specifically, he shared,



One of my main pursuits is just community engagement and partnership. So, I work very heavily with the community engagement work group that looks to listen to what the community has, and what they want, and then to meet those needs in some generative way.

The court navigator went on to explain that part of his motivation for joining this committee was the perspective his role provides. Most people in the courthouse are only familiar with their office or department, but he is familiar with the entire courthouse. Further, he interacts with hundreds of people coming into the courthouse each week and hears their questions and challenges. In these meetings, he can speak up for the community and use his broad knowledge of the courthouse to help develop court-wide solutions. One court personnel explained,



[The navigator] has a lot of insight that some of us might not have. I think he can represent the point of view of a person coming in [to court] and having to navigate the system that sometimes people who are just [in court] day-to-day working as part of the system might not see

The court navigator has used the flexibility of the role to engage in other activities related to improving people’s access to the court as well. For example, he joined the court’s Racial Equity Action Plan committee. He is helping to create a video advertising the navigator role in Spanish to reach the county’s Spanish-speaking population. Finally, he has advocated for changes around the courthouse like increasing signage and the addition of benches by the exit doors to increase accessibility. Court personnel value the additional ways the navigator chooses to engage around the courthouse. One court personnel expressed, “What I have witnessed in both the persons who have been in [the navigator] position thus far is they have taken the position and made it their own.”

## **Referral Network**

### **Strategies to Develop Network**

Developing a network is critical to the court navigator’s familiarity with the courthouse and ability to accurately direct people and connect them to resources. To develop this network, the navigator took the time to meet people around the courthouse when he began in his role. Many

of the court personnel recalled the navigator coming to their offices, introducing himself, explaining his role, and asking them questions about their departments. The navigator's goal was to become familiar with each department and the reasons people visiting the court would seek each department out. Additionally, the navigator asked court personnel in each office, "What are some things that people come in here for that they're misguided for?' ... So that I can make sure ... I don't repeat those same mistakes." One court personnel emphasized how helpful it was for the navigator to ask these questions of each department because "there is a lot of misinformation in the courthouse" since many people who work in the court are not familiar with departments outside their own. This can result in people being sent to the wrong places when they ask for directions. The navigator works to avoid misdirection by being familiar with each department and regularly checking in with departments to stay updated on any changes.

### **Strategies to Maintain Connections**

The court navigator maintains his network by regularly collaborating with other court personnel. The navigator explained that, even though he works alone, he views other court personnel as coworkers. As such, he has worked hard to establish rapport and open lines of communication with as many court personnel as possible. The navigator reports that court personnel have begun to reach out to him more frequently with questions or problems they want his help addressing. Other court personnel echoed this sentiment sharing that they engage in regular, sometimes frequent, communication with the navigator. One interviewee shared that he regularly discusses the protocols his office requires of visitors with the navigator to make sure the navigator has current information. The interviewee shared, "we're pretty good at navigating that together." Another court personnel expressed that he himself goes to the court navigator for help with directions or to find resources around the courthouse since the navigator has more general knowledge of the court than he does. A service provider located within the courthouse expressed, "if I need something, I will reach out to him. [The navigator] is super accessible. He's willing to help anytime we need him. It's really good to work with him because ...he's somebody who is really

approachable and dedicated to help[ing] people.” Finally, reflecting on why he has been so successful in building a strong network throughout the courthouse, the navigator shared,



The beauty about this role is that it’s not in conflict with any other role. It really is the ultimate support role where you’re just looking to bolster other entities in the courthouse. You’re just looking to make things more efficient and effective. So, because of that, I was more than welcome in every single room that I walked into.



## NEEDS CONSIDERED

The court navigator position aims to provide a very light touch and spends only a few minutes with each person to whom he provides services. Thus, he has less opportunity to uncover specific behavioral health or social service-related needs. While the navigator is prepared to refer people to behavioral health and social service resources in the community and in the courthouse, he focuses on addressing needs related to navigating the courthouse.

### Navigation Needs

A need that arises regularly for people visiting the courthouse is assistance with directions around the courthouse. In interviews, people repeatedly commented on the confusing layout of the Buncombe County courthouse. Court personnel described the courthouse as “incredibly difficult to navigate geographically” because a new addition was added to the original courthouse in 2013. As a result, the courthouse, “is a combination of an old building and a new building, and it’s 15 floors and just for example, there’s three different sets of elevators that all take

you to different places.” Another court personnel added that, because there is a new section and an old section, the courthouse “has different floors but same [office] numbers.” These court personnel are familiar with the courthouse and still describe it as confusing. Empathizing with how it must feel to visit the courthouse, one court personnel said,



I can imagine coming in to actually have to go to court and it’s just like, there’s no clear way that you’re supposed to go. There’s the police presence and having to go through security, and then after that it’s a little bit like, what am I supposed to do? There’s the big open [lobby]. There’s no clear signage.

The navigator confirmed that most of the help he provides involves giving directions or even walking people where they need to go.

## **Language Barrier Needs**

Buncombe County has a large Spanish-speaking population who experience the added difficulty of a language barrier when they visit the courthouse. One court personnel explained “It is crucial for us to have a bilingual [court navigator], and not just Spanish and English. I wish we can have other languages as well. But the Latino population is big.” This same person has noticed that more Spanish-speaking people seem to be coming to the courthouse, perhaps because of the addition of a court navigator who speaks Spanish, “before, not a lot of people came forward because they were afraid, or they didn’t have anybody to help them. But as people are learning that they have bilingual people at the courthouse, I feel like more people are coming.” The court navigator echoed statements about the large Spanish-speaking population and expressed that many of his interactions were in Spanish. He shared that some people come to him with questions about letters they have received from the court. These letters often include specific legal verbiage that can be difficult to understand, especially in another language, leading to frustration with the court process. One court personnel explained,



A lot of people are not familiar with the legal language. And so for them, they might receive a letter that says whatever it says, and they're like, 'I don't get it.' So just to go to somebody and say, 'I need to understand what's in this letter. Where do I need to go?' ...and to have somebody to help them to navigate through that.

While the navigator cannot provide legal aid, he can provide point of service bilingual assistance to translate the content of letters and point people to the correct office to appropriately address the contents of the letter.

### **Clarity on Court Process Needs**

Several court personnel expressed concern that coming to the courthouse could be a stressful or frightening experience for people. As a result, people need someone in the courthouse who can help alleviate their fear, often by providing them with needed information. Court personnel described the courthouse as “scary” and “like an airport.” They reflected on the fact that people enter the courthouse by going through a metal detector and are surrounded by deputies at the courthouse entrance. One court personnel described the uneasiness some people may feel asking a deputy in the courthouse for help, saying, “A lot of deputies are friendly, but not everyone is comfortable talking to a deputy.” This person went on to explain that the navigator was important because the courthouse “needs to have non-law enforcement [at the entrance] for folks who are not comfortable in that setting.” Many of the interviewees felt that it was essential to have a person who is friendly and approachable at the courthouse entrance to answer questions and put people at ease. One court personnel also expressed that, because the navigator speaks Spanish, he can help assuage fears that may be unique to the Spanish-speaking community in Buncombe County. Specifically, this court personnel explained,



A lot of people definitely would not show up in court because they are scared. So other things that I have tried to talk to people is, 'Okay, we want you to know that when you come to court, nobody's going to call immigration on you.' Because a lot of people, they wouldn't call the police or they wouldn't come to court because they're afraid. And so for us to be giving them that information in Spanish, that is huge.

## **Behavioral Health and Social Service Needs**

Court personnel shared that it is common for people to come to the courthouse and, in the process of addressing what brought them to the courthouse, realize that they need access to other services too. One court personnel explained, "Sometimes people come in and they're not even asking for something, but when we find out what they need, then we can direct them." Another court personnel similarly explained, "People come to the courthouse for one thing, but then they find something out, and they [now] have five other questions that they need answered." When these situations arise, the court navigator can address these needs by referring people to behavioral health or social service resources within the courthouse or within the community.





## PROCESS FOR INVOLVEMENT

The court navigator in Buncombe County has fairly limited involvement with people. However, his involvement still unfolds in four stages: referral to the navigator, court navigation, connection to services, and wrap-up.

### Stage 1: Referral

The first column in Figure 1 demonstrates different ways that people are referred to the navigator. The most common way is going up to the navigator's desk located in the courthouse lobby. There is no formal or in-depth intake process. Instead, the navigator describes his initial contact with people in the following way:



My typical interactions with people are going to be, if they come up to me, I ask them, "Hi, how are you doing? What can I help you with?" And then they come to me with an issue of, I don't know what this means, or I don't know where I'm going, or can you look up a court date for me and a location? Or they come to me with a much broader problem of, okay, this is my context, and then I can tell them what I can do to help.

Court personnel and people who received services from the navigator frequently described him as "a friendly face" who is easy to approach for assistance. The navigator intentionally dresses casually to increase approachability and spends time both behind his desk and walking around the lobby of the courthouse. Court personnel described the navigator as eager to help and shared that they have seen him actively reaching out to people in the lobby who appeared to need assistance. This proactive approach ensures that visitors receive the support they need without feeling

overwhelmed or lost. Besides approaching or being approached by the navigator, people may also be referred to him by other court personnel. Several court personnel shared that they do not hesitate to send people to the navigator for help or guidance. In particular, the deputies and cashiers represent two of the most frequent sources of referral to the navigator as they are also located in the court lobby.

## **Stage 2: Court Navigation**

Consistent with the position's name, one of the main goals of the court navigator is to assist with physical navigation around the courthouse. This includes providing court visitors with directions around the building, such as to courtrooms or to the offices of various court personnel. One person who received services from the navigator recalled, "he helped us find one of the court-appointed attorneys, explained to us the people there, what we were doing." In addition to requesting directions, people frequently come to the navigator requesting information about their hearing (e.g., time, location) or asking questions about a communication they received from the court. In these cases, the navigator looks up information about a person's hearing or reviews the communication and explains what is being requested of the person and where in the courthouse they should go to address the request. Overall, the navigator's interactions with people often last less than a minute. As a result, the navigator must be able to communicate information clearly and concisely within these brief interactions.

## **Stage 3: Connection to Services**

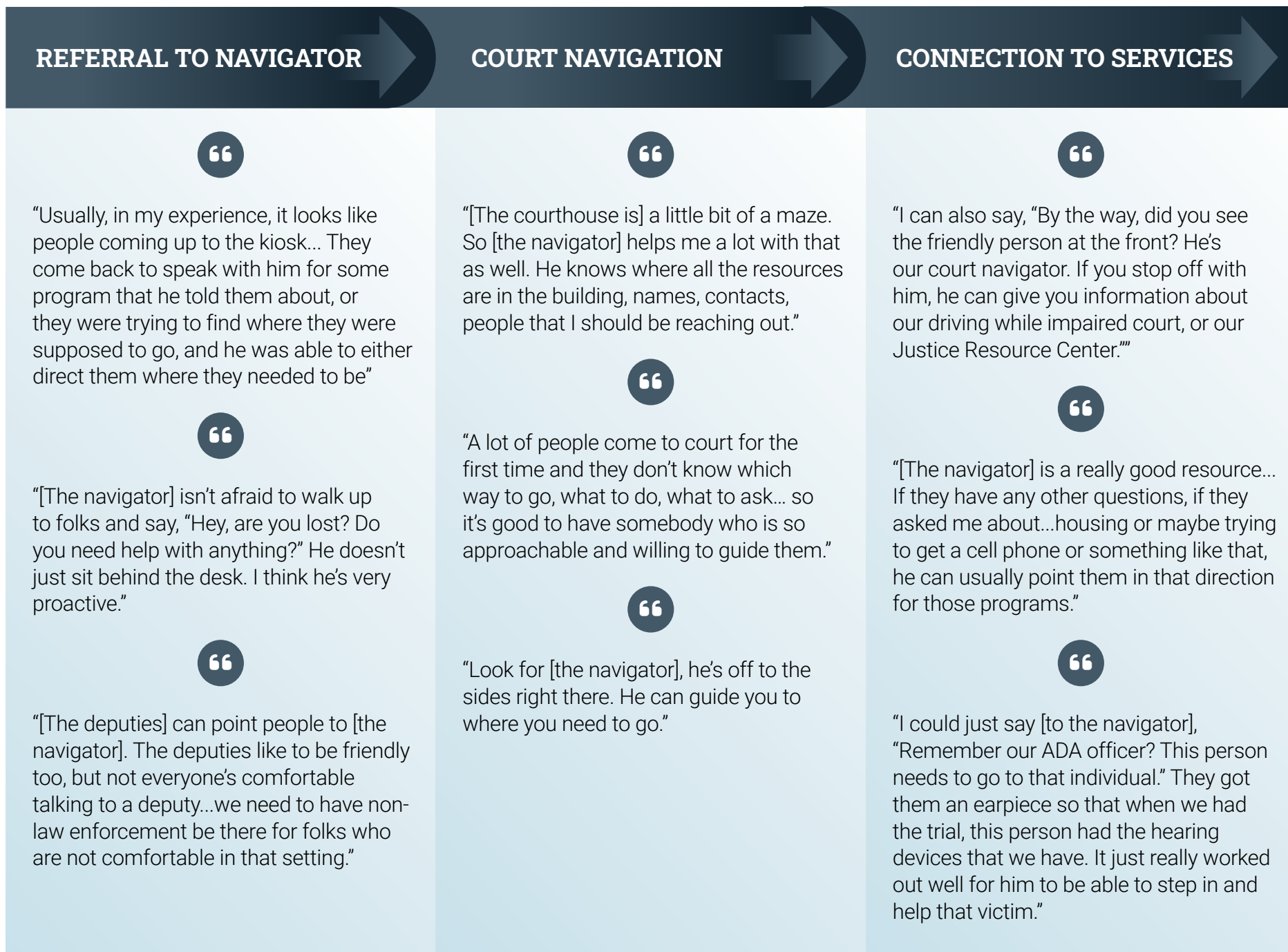
Another main goal of the court navigator is to facilitate connections to relevant services. Not every person the navigator interacts with wants to be connected to services, some only need help navigating the courthouse. Still, the navigator is aware of a wide range of resources available both in the courthouse and in the community, and he is prepared to connect people to these resources. Within the courthouse, the navigator may help someone get connected to translation services or to the Americans with Disabilities (ADA) Officer. The navigator also connects people to the Justice Resource Center (JRC). The JRC is located within the courthouse and hosts a range of community service providers who

provide direct support. Within the community, the navigator connects people to various behavioral health and social services. In particular, the navigator connects people to services provided by Goodwill as his employment through Goodwill provides him with a great deal of familiarity with the services they offer. However, he may refer people to a range of other services as well. The last column in Figure 1 provides examples from court personnel about the services to which the navigator regularly connects people.

### **Stage 4: Wrap Up**

At the end of most interactions with people, the court navigator performs two tasks. First, he asks if the person would like to sign up for Buncombe County's court reminder system. This approach has led to rapid growth in the reminder system, far exceeding initial expectations. The navigator originally aimed to sign up 50 people per year but has successfully enrolled 50 or more people most months. Anecdotally, several court staff expressed that the increase in use of the reminder system appears to be associated with a decrease in failures to appear in court. Second, the navigator completes a brief contact form to track the interaction. The form does not collect personal details but notes the type of help given (e.g., directions, court reminder sign-up, connection to services). The form also allows the navigator to indicate whether he provided unique assistance to a person. Data collected in the form are compiled monthly and reviewed by the navigator and his supervisors, allowing them to track the frequency of the different types of assistance. A few court personnel expressed the value of the navigator's tracking form sharing that it has been impressive to see the number of people with whom he interacts each month. Some also shared that tracking the numbers has been a good way to quantify the reach that the navigator is having.

**FIGURE 1: Quotes Characterizing the Process for Involvement with the Court Navigator: Buncombe County, North Carolina**





## BENEFITS

Court personnel and people who had received services all shared examples of the court navigator's benefits. Navigator benefits fall into two categories: aiding court staff and service providers and helping people in the courthouse.

### **The Navigator Aids Court Staff and Service Providers**

Several court personnel expressed gratefulness at the burden the court navigator role lifted from their daily workload. Many explained that, prior to the navigator position, it was common for them to lose time from their regular responsibilities when trying to answer questions that were outside the scope of their knowledge. With the navigator in place, court personnel can refer people to him and know that he will help. This allows them to focus on their job role and responsibilities while reassuring them that people are getting the information they need. One court personnel explained,



People come to the courthouse for one thing, but then they find something out, and they [now] have five other questions that they need answered. I think [the navigator is] really good for those situations because it's not always easy to know [where] to send someone. ... If there's someone who comes to me, and they've got that situation where I know what I can help them with, and I've done that, but there might be something else, like they need help applying for food stamps or some other program that I'm not able to help them with one-on-one,... [the navigator is] really good for that [situation].


Similarly, one county personnel shared that she tells people with whom she works to go straight to the court navigator for help when they get to the courthouse. Being able to do this eases people's concerns about the unfamiliarity of court and allows the service provider to feel confident that the people she works with will have help handling their business at the courthouse. She said that some of the people she works with "go [to court] pretty often, and I have that experience, where they're like, 'Oh yeah, I spoke to [the navigator], he helped me.'"

Other court personnel have found that, with the court navigator in place, fewer people come into their offices by mistake or because they have been misdirected. This cuts down on the amount of time they lose to redirecting people. Finally, some court personnel expressed how helpful it is to have a navigator who is bilingual in English and Spanish. Prior to having the navigator, few court employees spoke Spanish. Those that did were located within specific departments so getting pulled away from their work to provide point of service bilingual assistance was disruptive. Some court personnel suggested that having a bilingual navigator has proven to be so helpful it should be a requirement for the position as it is "a crucial benefit to the community."

The court navigator himself expressed that he sees part of his role as helping court personnel in addition to helping people who come into the court, "Just like the courthouse visitors, [the navigator is] also there to unburden and to lessen any kind of reoccurring issues, at least clerically, that people might have in the courthouse from an internal employee perspective."

## **The Navigator Helps People in the Courthouse**

People who received help from the court navigator expressed how easily he directed them around the courthouse and how pleasant he was during their interaction. One woman shared that being at the courthouse can be "nerve-wracking" and "overwhelming." The navigator helped this woman and her mother figure out which office they needed to visit and even walked them there. The woman shared that she was not sure how she would have managed the visit without the help of the navigator who she described as being friendly and respectful. She felt that "to have a friendly face as well to have a helpful face makes a big difference." Court personnel shared that



they frequently see the navigator walking people around the courthouse. Further, if the navigator does not know where to direct someone, court personnel noted that he would walk with them and help them figure out where to go. One court personnel explained, “Until he finds the direction for the person, he doesn’t leave them alone. So that’s how dedicated he is.” Others echoed these sentiments by sharing that it was common for the navigator to walk someone to their office and stay long enough to ensure that the person was in the right place.

Another woman, who was a social worker at the court looking for a client, also shared that her interaction with the navigator was incredibly helpful. He helped her locate her client and gave her business cards she could hand out to other clients. She expressed being grateful that she would be able to tell her clients they could go to the navigator for help.

## Court Clinician—Chesterfield County, Virginia



### OVERVIEW

In Chesterfield County, one court clinician offers services for anyone who is involved with the court and is experiencing behavioral health needs. The current clinician has been in the position for about three years. He has an office near the entrance of the courthouse and spends most of his time either providing direct services for people in court or coordinating with court actors and service providers to facilitate connections to community-based services. In this section, we describe the court clinician’s goals, onboarding process, general workflow, and network.

### Goals

The court clinician described his goals as:



To get involved with defendants who have a mental health diagnosis or [whose] charges involve a mental health aspect, and provide support, diversion, and treatment where it's appropriate. To help cut down, not on the overall recidivism rate, but help to cut down on the individual's recidivism.

The clinician elaborated that even if he sees someone back in court in the future after connecting them to services, he does not “consider that a failure.” Instead, he “consider[s] that another step towards the successful outcome.” Several service providers agreed that the court clinician’s goal was to help break cycles of system involvement and reduce recidivism by linking court-involved people with mental illness



to mental health services. A court actor said that “the main point [of the clinician role] is helping an individual, dealing with their [mental health] issues, trying to make their life better, not be charged with these crimes, [and] send them off to live a productive life.”

A secondary goal for the court clinician is to help educate the courts on the role behavioral health issues can play in contributing to legal system involvement. One service provider said the clinician was to, “be a consultant for the judges and be able to increase awareness around mental health, substance use, [and] their impact with the criminal justice system.” Several court actors echoed that information from the clinician often helps inform their decisions. One court actor expressed, “I think the more professionals like [the clinician] that we have in the system, the better decisions we make as a system.”

Overall, the court clinician aims to break cycles of system involvement and reduce individual recidivism in three ways: 1) connecting people to behavioral health services in the community, 2) providing direct support to people as they navigate the legal and behavioral health systems, and 3) educating court actors about the impact of behavioral health needs on system involvement.

## **Onboarding Process**

The court clinician position requires a master’s degree and a background in crisis care and case management. In line with these qualifications, the current court clinician is a Licensed Professional Counselor with an extensive background in mental health and crisis counseling. He also has experience providing counseling services through a few Community Service Boards across the state of Virginia. The clinician is hired by a community-based behavioral health agency but is located within the courthouse.

The clinician described the onboarding process as fairly limited. The prior clinician left some documentation on the basics of the role that he used as a starting point. The clinician did not shadow the prior clinician formally. However, he arranged for the prior clinician to be his residency supervisor to oversee the final step of his licensure process. In doing

so, he was able to learn more from her about the ways she fulfilled the court clinician role.

## **Workflow**

The court clinician role was intentionally designed to be flexible. The clinician described the position as “eclectic” and shared that he was given some latitude in shaping the position when he began. With that latitude, he added a therapeutic element to expand the position beyond its case management focus. The clinician developed this therapeutic element by introducing and educating court actors on the role a clinician could play in the court process and by using therapeutic language in reports provided to the court. The clinician feels these efforts have helped court actors understand mental health treatment's complexity and added credibility to the position. The clinician also opted to bring more direct mental health service provision to the position. As a result, the clinician divides his time between providing direct support to court-involved people and collaborating with court actors and service providers to ensure a person's behavioral health needs are being considered and to facilitate connection to community-based services.

## **Providing Support to Court-Involved People**

The court clinician primarily works with people who have current or recently closed court cases. Many people are court-ordered to meet with him as part of pretrial or probation conditions of release, though some meet with him voluntarily. He also frequently works with family members of court-involved people. The clinician meets with people to help them comply with court ordered treatment, connect them to behavioral health providers in the community, and provide direct therapeutic interventions. The clinician shared he views his work as,



Almost like a preview, sort of establishing that therapeutic rapport right here in the courthouse and sort of easing them into a longer-term treatment, whether that be individual therapy or whether that be substance [related] or what have you. And it also helps the defendant to go through their court process understanding that they have an advocate here in the courthouse [who] understands their specific concerns about their own health. I think that sort of eases the anxiety for a lot of people.

A woman who worked with the clinician on her daughter’s court case confirmed that he connected her to a mental health crisis line and got her daughter referred for a competency evaluation. A service provider shared that the clinician regularly attends court hearings to support people through the process and to help answer their questions after the hearing. This provider shared that she introduces her clients to the clinician “as an advocate for them. Someone they can trust in the system, again, to talk to, to support them through their court process.”

### **Collaboration with Court Actors**

The court clinician collaborates closely with a wide range of court actors including judges, attorneys, probation/parole officers, and pretrial services staff. One way the clinician collaborates with court actors is by spending time in courtrooms to consult with the judges, follow along with a case, or immediately step in to work with a person who becomes particularly distressed. One court actor expressed how helpful it is for the clinician to be in the courtroom:



[The court clinician] can see firsthand some of the testimony and evidence that is coming in certain cases in terms of trying to make a decision about what his involvement would be ... and what is needed to help the situation, the defendant, or even in some cases, getting victims pointed in the right direction. ... And that's kind of a unique thing because most other providers... they're offsite. They're not there seeing it all play out in the courtroom.

Court actors also expressed that they see the clinician as a “partner” in their work. One court actor explained, “it mattered to me if people struggle with substance abuse issues [or] mental diagnoses and ... it's important to have the court clinician's perspective because that's not our specialty.” Another court actor shared that the clinician helps identify people who would benefit from connection to behavioral health services because court actors do not always pick up on that themselves.

At the same time, other court actors described regularly referring people to the court clinician when they do identify someone with behavioral health needs. Attorneys may request that the clinician help schedule an insanity or competency evaluation for their client. They may also request a mental health evaluation to help inform their recommendations to the court. For example, one court actor explained that he got the clinician involved in one of his cases to help develop a treatment plan that, if agreed to, would reduce the amount of time the person charged would have to spend in jail.

Judges also request mental health evaluations to inform their decisions at bail and sentencing hearings. After completing an evaluation, the clinician writes a report that he shares with all parties involved in making decisions in the person's case. One court actor expressed that the reports help ensure that “people with mental health issues are getting treated appropriately in court.” Further, the clinician may continue working with a case after a bail or sentencing decision is made if, for example, a judge decides to order mental health services as a condition

of pretrial release or probation. When this happens, the clinician may collaborate with pretrial or probation to help ensure that the condition is met. Sometimes, this means connecting people to behavioral health services in the community. Other times, the clinician himself directly provides services in the form of check-ins and brief counseling sessions.

## **Collaboration with Community-Based Service Providers**

The court clinician frequently collaborates on cases with community service providers. Service providers indicated that they often reach out to the clinician when working with court-involved people to see if the clinician is familiar with the person. They may ask the clinician his impression of a person's needs or the barriers a person may face to success in treatment. One service provider explained that when she met with the clinician,



We would talk about supports that [the client] has, whether that was familial or friendships. We would talk about barriers to treatment. We would talk about potential misdiagnosing due to that cultural component. So it was like a really good case consultation.

The court clinician serves as a vital link between the courtroom and service providers, facilitating the exchange of critical information and ensuring that people's needs are communicated effectively in both directions. Service providers may ask the clinician to support a person's court involvement or connect them with their attorney. Providers might also request the clinician to speak in court to explain recommendations, service plans, or concerns, acting as the service provider's "voice." Providers may contact the clinician before a court date to highlight specific needs, allowing the clinician to plan, meet with attorneys or the judge, and inform them if the person might display mental or physical health symptoms. In one instance, a clinician arranged for a judge to see a physically ill person in the courthouse parking lot. The court clinician may also relay information back to service providers from the court. For instance, service providers shared that they sometimes

ask for details about their clients' hearings as they are rarely able to attend court themselves. They may also ask questions about the court process broadly to make sure they understand and can appropriately advocate for their clients.

## **Development and Maintenance of a Network**

Developing a network is critical to the court clinician's ability to work closely with court actors and service providers. The clinician explained that when he first stepped into the role, "I did the tour of introductions to the different departments around [the courthouse], and I let everybody know ... that my mission is to get people into treatment." Several court actors remembered the clinician visiting their office within the court. One court personnel recalled the clinician coming to her office and taking a proactive role by asking, "what do we need, and how can he help, and things of that nature." It was after this introduction that her office began to really reach out to him for help or to refer people to him. Another court actor similarly shared that after a presentation "to tell us about who he is and what he does" her office began to reach out more frequently.

Other court actors shared that they first met the clinician in the courtroom or were introduced to him by a judge. The clinician emphasized the value of having judicial buy-in: other court actors were more likely to work with him when they saw the judges reaching out to him frequently. In fact, several court actors described some of the judges as champions for the court clinician role, and the judges themselves were enthusiastic about the role's value.

Several community-based service providers shared that they met the court clinician through internal connections because they worked at the same behavioral health agency as the clinician. The clinician shared that he has relied on the connections he has built throughout his career while also making new connections.

Nearly all the court actors and service providers to whom we spoke expressed that the clinician was readily available to them whenever they reached out with questions or to refer someone to him. As one court

personnel described, “He’s approachable, he’s reachable, he’s in court, he’s helpful, he’s here for anything that we need him to assist with.”



## NEEDS CONSIDERED

The court clinician primarily focuses on identifying and addressing people’s behavioral health needs. However, he also considers needs related to minimizing court-related stress and anxiety.

### **Behavioral Health Needs**

Identifying behavioral health needs is the main consideration for the court clinician. As one court actor described, court-involved people with mental health needs were “falling through the cracks” because “this sector of defendants don’t have the wherewithal to make an appointment [with service providers], follow up, and go through all that.” They went on to explain that the court clinician position “was proposed to help [the court] with that segment, to get assistance to them.”

The court clinician considers behavioral health needs by connecting people to community-based services and by providing behavioral health services himself, as we describe in the section above. One court actor described the value of the clinician’s direct service provision by explaining that working with the clinician can provide some continuity of care when a person is experiencing lapses in service from their primary provider, “[The court clinician] gets to be a little bit of a steady person for them, even despite turnover within their primary provider.”

### **Minimizing Court-Related Stress and Anxiety**

Several people expressed concern that coming to the courthouse can be stressful or anxiety-inducing. These feelings can stem from uncertainty about how to access resources, next steps in a specific court case, or the court processes and procedures overall. The clinician aims to address these concerns by being available to answer people’s

questions and advocating for them throughout their court involvement. One service provider explained, “I know he advocates for them, supports them in feeling more comfortable in court 'cause it can be scary, I'm sure. [He meets] with them one-on-one outside of the courtroom where they can have more open dialogue if they have any questions.” One court actor echoed how important it is for the clinician to help people understand their court proceedings as misunderstandings can result in serious consequences,



Often, [when referring someone to the court clinician], it's going to be somebody who I feel is putting themselves in jeopardy of further legal action being taken against them because of their behavior in court or their inability to comprehend what's going on. So maybe they're not risking being charged and held for contempt of court, but they're risking not having a full understanding of what they're doing.



## PROCESS FOR INVOLVEMENT

While the court clinician emphasized that he responds individually to meet each person's unique needs, the clinician does follow a general pattern when working with someone. This pattern typically unfolds in four stages: referral to the clinician, first contact with the clinician, delivery of or connection to services, and follow-up.



## **Stage 1: Referral**

People are first connected to the court clinician through referrals. These referrals come predominantly from three sources: 1) clinician outreach; 2) judicial and attorney referral; and 3) service provider referral.

### **Clinician Outreach**

When the current court clinician began in his position, he would find people who needed his services by searching the court docket each day for people who had a hearing and had an previous contact with the county's behavioral health provider. Special attention was paid to people who were on the docket and had been involved in any Crisis Interventions. The clinician would then attend court hearings and offer to work with a person if both the person and the court were willing.

As court actors became familiar with his position, the court clinician began to get more referrals to work with people from them. As a result, the clinician is transitioning away from the practice of cross-referencing court dockets and county behavioral health records and relies primarily on referrals. We describe the referral sources below. In addition to referrals, the clinician also works with people who approach him in the courthouse. He described that, because his office is by the entrance to the court, it is common for people to stop by and ask to speak with him.

### **Referrals from Judges and Attorneys**

Judges refer people to the court clinician using two strategies. First, they use a referral form developed by the clinician. Judges fill out a short form explaining why a person should work with the clinician and this form serves as a court order. The person being referred is then responsible for scheduling their initial appointment with the clinician. Judges also email the referral form to the court clinician for his reference. Most often, judges refer people to the clinician for a mental health evaluation or to work with the clinician as a condition of pretrial release or a requirement of their sentence. Second, judges informally request a quick response from the clinician if someone in the courtroom is in active crisis.

Attorneys also regularly sought out advice from the court clinician regarding their clients. Both prosecuting attorneys and defense attorneys

spoke about reaching out to the clinician to discuss cases where behavioral health may be an important factor. These consultations often lead to the clinician becoming more involved with a person. Attorneys also reported requesting mental health evaluations for their clients to inform their recommendations to the judge.

### **Referrals from Community-Based Service Providers**

Community-based service providers also refer people to the court clinician. Several providers mentioned that they may contact the clinician when working with a person if they want the clinician's help communicating information to a judge or an attorney. Providers also stated that they may ask for the clinician's opinion on some cases. Lastly, the clinician may connect with people through his role working for Chesterfield County's crisis response team. While this role is a separate job from his work as the court clinician, he occasionally encounters people during crisis response situations who he then offers to meet with in his capacity as court clinician.

### **Stage 2: First Contact**

After getting a referral, the court clinician will usually have a first meeting with a person in his office. The clinician describes this meeting as "unstructured" by design, to better establish rapport and encourage people to be open about their behavioral health needs or their questions about the court process. According to people who have received services, this first meeting begins with the clinician describing his role, as well as his goals in working with them. From there, the clinician will do a rapid, informal assessment of behavioral health needs to 1) determine if he believes that the person requires long-term treatment and 2) gather information for referral to a different service provider, if needed.

### **Stage 3: Delivery of or Connection to Services**

For some people, the court clinician directly provides mental health services. These services include mental health evaluations and short-term counseling. The clinician also facilitates connections to providers in the community. Most often, the clinician connects people to services through the Community Service Board (CSB) for the county in which

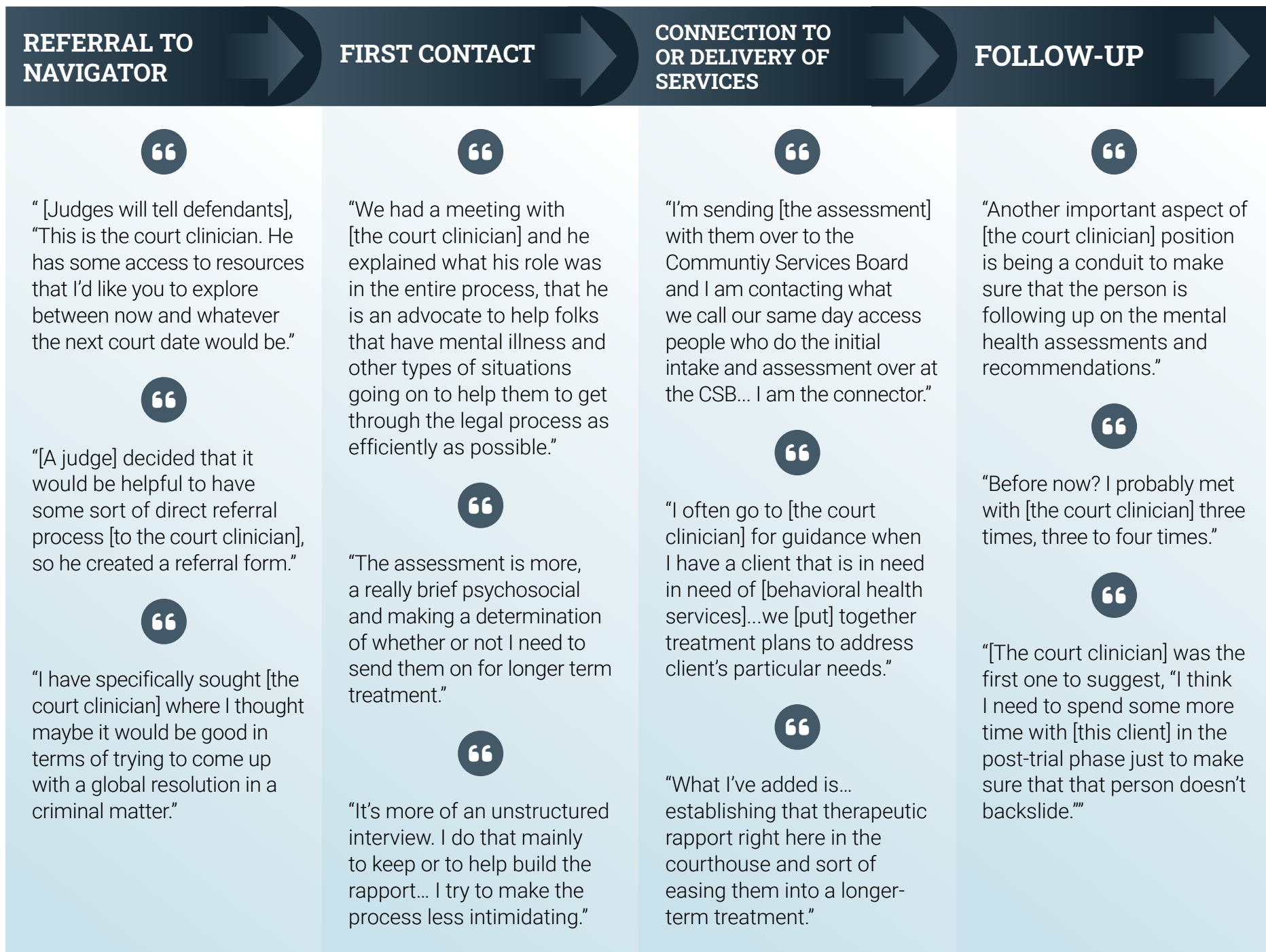
the person lives. CSBs are county-level networks of behavioral health service providers across the state of Virginia. As the clinician is an employee of Chesterfield's CSB, he is familiar with the services available. He also has familiarity with other CSBs he has worked for throughout his career, as well as those he has met via networking. People who have received services from the clinician describe the clinician taking the time to get them more comfortable with the idea of engaging in longer-term treatment.

### **Stage 4: Follow-Up**

For some people, the court clinician only sees them once or twice to provide services while for others, the clinician may work with them over an extended period. For example, if a person is hesitant about getting connected to other providers, the clinician may meet with them several times to work towards that goal. Additionally, when working with the court toward case resolution, the clinician may continue to see a person for several weeks or months in an effort to help the person remain stable.

Some people are court-ordered to work with the clinician for a period as a condition of pretrial release or probation. One court actor reflected on a case in which this happened explaining that the clinician worked with the person while their case was open, "then [the person] was stabilized, case concluded, but as a condition of the court order, he's still required to be with [the court clinician] for an additional six months so we can make sure that he maintains his mental health." When the clinician works with a person as part of court orders, he meets with the person to provide direct mental health services and also works to connect the person to services in the community so that they can transition to long-term care.

**FIGURE 2: Quotes Characterizing the Process for Involvement with the Court Clinician: Chesterfield County, Virginia**





## BENEFITS

All interviewees described examples of the court clinician's benefits. Clinician benefits fall into four categories: 1) aiding court actors, 2) aiding service providers, 3) aiding people coming to court, and 4) bridging the gap between the criminal legal and behavioral health systems.

### Aiding Court Actors

The court clinician aids court actors by reducing their workload, acting as a behavioral health resource, and supporting the competency process. The clinician reduces court actors' workload by gathering a wide range of behavioral health information. One court actor explained, "It can save time in certain cases [and] get everybody on board to try to do the right thing." Another court actor agreed and further explained that the clinician "is able to dig a lot deeper, whereas we [court actors] sometimes don't have that time to dig deeper. And also, if I do [have time], I don't know what I'm necessarily looking for."

Court actors found the court clinician to be a valuable resource for cases involving behavioral health needs. Many appreciated being able to consult the clinician, with this sentiment shared across prosecution, defense, and judges. One court actor noted, "we're constantly encountering people with personality disorders or mental health conditions or substance abuse problems, and we're not trained in all that." Another valued the clinician's input because "that's not our specialty." A final actor reflected on a case for which the clinician's input "absolutely affected how we came up with the recommended sentence."

The court clinician plays a key role in decisions about raising the issue of competence to stand trial. One court actor felt that the clinician prevents judges and attorneys from using competency as a strategy to obtain a mental health evaluation or treatment. Instead, when mental health is the primary concern, the person can be referred to the clinician. However, another court actor mentioned that sometimes the question

of competency is only considered after the clinician provides insight into a person’s mental health status. She explained,



I have a lot of clients that struggle with different diagnoses: bipolar, schizophrenia, substance abuse disorder, different types of issues there. And what I particularly utilize [the clinician] for is just finding out [my client’s] background. I’ve even had him go to the jail and do evaluations on people just so I can have a baseline of ... what they’re understanding because then some of those things can flow into competency issues for us. And a lot of times, if you don’t have that training, you cannot recognize what you’re seeing. ... And that’s sometimes where I bring [the court clinician] in ... and I think having [the clinician] is certainly an asset to all of us.

## **Aiding Service Providers**

Service providers emphasized that the court clinician serves as their voice in court when they cannot attend themselves, ensuring their recommendations are understood and considered by court actors. Before the clinician’s involvement, providers often sent letters detailing treatment plans but lacked confidence that their input was being considered or understood. The clinician also facilitates communication with court actors, which was previously challenging. As one provider explained:



Prior to [the court clinician], we didn’t have any connection on the inside [of the court]. We didn’t have any way to talk to attorneys. We would call, blow up their phone, leave messages with the attorneys, and nobody would ever answer the call ... we just had no inroad at all.

Service providers now feel more confident that their perspectives are heard and considered in court. Additionally, they often turn to the clinician for guidance on navigating court procedures, appreciating the help in understanding court lingo and procedures.

## **Aiding People Coming to Court**

The court clinician helps court-involved people by connecting them to community services, preventing misrepresentation, and providing brief counseling. Previously, a court actor encouraged people to engage in mental health services but saw little follow-through due to issues like cost or confusion. Now, this actor refers people to the clinician, who connects them to affordable services and follows up to ensure the connection was successful. The clinician's involvement has been described as "extraordinarily important and helpful." Another court actor noted that before the clinician, 90% of the cases he referred to mental health treatment did not successfully connect to services. He felt that referring people to the clinician instead of directly to services has significantly improved the rate of successful connections.

Service providers appreciate that the clinician ensures people with mental illness aren't misrepresented in court by explaining their background and diagnoses to court actors and advocating for solutions that involve treatment. One parent shared how the clinician advocated for her daughter by explaining her daughter's psychological issues to the judge, which made the court process less daunting. She felt that without the clinician, her and her daughter "would've been completely lost in the system."

Another parent highlighted the counseling support he received, saying, "He helped me understand how to deal with my son... it's opened up my eyes a lot." He expressed deep gratitude for the clinician, who recognized his struggles and provided much-needed support, "We just sat down and talked... [the clinician] understood that I was crying for help" This parent now feels he finally has someone to advocate for his son in court.

## Bridging the Gap Between Systems

Many interviewees expressed that the court clinician bridges the gap between the criminal legal and behavioral health system by coordinating and clarifying communication between court actors and service providers. The clinician's coordination ensures that information is accurately exchanged. Both service providers and court actors reported experiencing difficulties getting in contact with each other to ask questions, follow up on the progress of a case, or exchange paperwork. When this happens, people reach out to the clinician for help making the connection. One court actor explained, "Being in that world, [the clinician] knows a lot of people or at least some direct contacts that we can use, and it's just helpful. It helps the process along so much better." Another court actor shared that she has turned to the clinician to get updates on a person's progress in working with a service provider, particularly in the context of competency restoration. She expressed that she and other court actors have used the clinician as a



Conduit between the court and the restoration body ... to make sure that the defendant was getting to the resource that he needed for his restoration. And, that restoration was in fact actually happening at a pace that would at least get them restored if that was going to be possible.

The second way the court clinician bridges the gap between the criminal legal and behavioral health systems is by clarifying communication between these systems. One court actor shared that he learned that there was a "language divide" between "what the court was ordering and what [the behavioral health agency] was expecting. We [the court] weren't using the specific terms that would mean something to them [the agency] so they were left with a question mark." A service provider described this same miscommunication from her perspective, "Sometimes judges will write in an order what they want the person to do, not realizing that the person needs to be assessed for and qualify



for [that treatment]. A judge saying that [a person] need[s] X, Y, and Z does not mean that they meet the criteria for [X, Y, Z].” This service provider went on to share that it was helpful to have a court clinician who could “advocate for both sides” by helping the behavioral health agency understand the judges’ perspectives and vice versa. The court actor who addressed the language divide explained that it was the court clinician who called the divide to his attention and has helped the courts use clearer language. This court actor expressed being grateful to have help navigating the language divide because he wanted to know “when there [are] gaps in communication so that we [the court] can effectuate better communication so that the person that we want to be getting help gets the help that they need.” The service provider echoed the benefit of having a court clinician who “speaks both languages” and can help people navigate both systems simultaneously.

# Social Work and Court Navigators—Franklin County, Ohio



## OVERVIEW

In Franklin County, one social work navigator and three court navigators work together to offer services to anyone involved with the eviction court. The social work navigator provides crisis counseling in the courthouse and connects people to resources in the community. The court navigators provide directions to people to help them find their way around the eviction court floor, answer questions about the court process, and connect people to the resources that are available in the courthouse. Specifically, there are tables set up in the hallway outside of the eviction courtrooms at which resource providers sit, ready to meet with people before or after they participate in eviction court proceedings. Resource providers rotate but typically include rental assistance programs, legal aid, mediation services, the Department of Public Health, and Veteran services. The navigators have all been in their positions for a year or less and spend most of their time on the eviction court floor of the courthouse. In this section, we describe the navigators' goals, onboarding process, general workflow, and network.

### Goals

Interviewees described the combined goal of the social work and court navigators as being to reduce the negative impact of evictions by providing people with directions, information, and connections to resources.

The social work navigator primarily provides support, describing her goal as being to mitigate, “the harm and the negative experience and impact that an eviction has on someone” by being a soothing presence in the courthouse and providing resources that will have a lasting

impact. She feels she has been successful in reaching that goal when a person is “confidently participating in their case, that they're leaving with information, ... that they were able to exercise their own decision-making capacity.”

The court navigators primarily provide directions and information, while also providing some support. In this way, the two roles complement one another. One of the court navigators shared that her goal is “to try to help as many people as I can not get evicted.” She went on to share that even when she cannot prevent someone from being evicted, she strives to prevent them from having nowhere to go by getting them connected to a housing or shelter resource. Another navigator echoed that she feels she has been successful in working with someone when she has made the person feel more comfortable and gotten them connected to the right services for the specific need they are experiencing.

One court personnel expressed that a goal of the navigator positions is to make eviction court proceedings fairer, explaining that “we don't want to be just a factory that stomps out evictions. I think part of the role of justice is to make sure that it's a fair proceeding, and so in the end, if our ultimate goal is to help people, that's what the navigators are helping us do.”

## **Onboarding Process**

The social work navigator is a licensed social worker who is hired by the courthouse and holds an office in the court's Self Help Resource Center. Prior to being in this position, the social work navigator had provided behavioral health services in hospital and community settings. In these capacities, she provided psychiatric, substance use, crisis, and emergency mental health services. The current social work navigator is the second to fill this role. Her onboarding focused on becoming oriented to the courthouse and court processes. She also spent time becoming familiar with the resources provided in the courthouse and the community-based housing resources to which she now frequently refers people. She shared that, after starting the position, “The biggest adjustment personally is the scope of this work; it is both micro and macro. I come from working only with the individual in their hours of

crisis. This role allows me the opportunity to not only work individually with members of the public, but also to work on a team that is creating systematic change.”

The court navigators are also hired by the court. During onboarding, they were trained on how to provide support to people going through the court processes. First, they spent time on the eviction court process, ensuring that they understood it and could easily direct people around the eviction court floor and answer questions about their court involvement. Second, the court navigators watched training videos describing how to provide services with compassion and patience. One navigator shared that the onboarding process prepared her to “treat people how I want to be treated.”

## **Workflow**

The social work navigator and three court navigators work together as a team to cover the floor on which the eviction court is located and ensure that anyone who comes in for eviction court gets the help they need. The social work navigator has a table set up along with the other resources in the hallway outside the eviction courtroom. Throughout the day, she may be located at her table, walking around the hallway, or in her office, which is on the same floor as the eviction court. The social work navigator meets with people to discuss their needs and to get them connected to resources, often resources based in the community. She also provides short-term services, such as de-escalation and crisis management, for people experiencing mental health crises while involved in the eviction court process. Finally, if someone is at imminent risk of homelessness, she helps them make immediate connections to housing or shelter resources.

The court navigators have divided their work into three roles. One navigator is located near the entrance to the eviction court floor. She greets people as they first arrive and provides directions around the floor. Another navigator is located near the courtroom and meets people as they come out of court to connect them with the resources available in the hallway. The third court navigator walks around the hallway, helps people get checked in with the eviction court bailiff, and answers questions.

The social work navigator described how important it is for her and the court navigators to work closely with one another, as each of their roles are designed to overlap and provide support for each other and the public. The social work navigator explained, "I could not serve in my specific role, if not for the rest of the team having their eyes and ears open to hearing and seeing the need that is all around them, that I might miss when working with someone else." All four navigators shared that their work depends largely on the needs of people coming into court that day. The social work navigator explained that each day she is in eviction court from 8:00 AM to noon. Then in the afternoons, she follows up on any referrals she made, does research to further educate herself on available resources, and works on strengthening relationships within her network and building relationships with agencies she and the other navigators hope to collaborate. She shared that "each day is different."

The court navigators shared that, in a typical day, they arrive in the morning, set up their workstations, and immediately begin greeting people who are present for eviction court. While the court navigators typically work with people in the courthouse for eviction proceedings, sometimes people from the community, who do not have an eviction proceeding, come in to access the resources available in the eviction court hallway. People hear about the resources through word of mouth and the navigators will connect them to the resource they need.

## **Referral Networks**

Developing a network of referral sources has been critical to the social work navigator's ability to refer people to behavioral health and housing resources in the community. Because of her background, the social work navigator already had a wide network of mental health and substance use resources when she came into the role. She shared that she spent time expanding her network to housing and other social service-related resources when she first began in the navigator position and that she still spends some afternoons developing connections with service providers in the community. One of the court navigators confirmed the value of the social work navigator's referral networking sharing,



She's good at pulling different resources that we don't have available [in the courthouse], but resources she knows out in the community that may be able to link [people] with security deposits on their next place or any emergency housing so that way they're not completely out on the streets.

A service provider in the courthouse shared that the social work navigator has also networked with some of the private landlords who come into the courthouse. The social work navigator has encouraged landlords to reach out to her when they are having a conflict with a tenant so that she can get involved and connect either the tenant or the landlord to resources before the situation escalates to eviction. This provider described these connections as critical to preventing people from experiencing homelessness. One court personnel further shared that the social work navigator is plugged into the Homelessness Prevention Network developed by Franklin County's Community Shelter Board. This Network provides a range of support to keep families and individuals in their homes or help them access alternative housing options to prevent them from having to turn to emergency shelters. The social work navigator can refer people for support through the Network as one resource that may help prevent a person from becoming homeless.

## NEEDS CONSIDERED

While the social work navigator and court navigator can address some of the same needs, they each also address specific needs. The court navigators primarily consider needs related to navigating the court space, while the social work navigator primarily considers behavioral health needs. All navigators aim to address housing and social service-related needs and to help people with the anxiety they may feel over their involvement in eviction court.

## Navigation Needs

Many interviewees described the layout of the eviction court floor as confusing. One court personnel explained, “Physically, once [people] get off the elevator, a lot of times tenants, usually defendants in the eviction case, don't know where to go. If you've seen how our court is laid out, it's without help. And being able to follow signage, knowing the first place to go may be difficult.” Another court personnel shared that the resource tables outside the eviction courtrooms can add to the confusion. According to this person, “there's a lot of activity going on in the front hallway.” In fact, the court navigator positions were implemented to help guide and direct people around the eviction court floor. As one court personnel explained,



The navigator is more just trying to direct people to where to go, and what's available in terms of resources. So, that's why I kind of describe it to people outside of court as a wayfinding service, because a lot of our experience with eviction court is it can be a very overwhelming experience for a tenant who's never been there. And if there's a small landlord, it can also be overwhelming. If you're not there every day, it's not instinctual to you, what you need to do. The navigators are providing that kind of wayfinding knowledge that gives a little bit more of a level playing field for a tenant who's walking in and has never been there before.

People who have gotten services from the navigators echoed that it was difficult to know where to go after getting off the elevator. One person shared that they walked up to the navigator right after arriving on the floor because they “were kind of confused on where to go.” Others expressed the value of having someone there to direct them. One person compared attending the Franklin County eviction court to another courthouse and said the experience in Franklin County was

better specifically because “here there are assistants. There you did a lot of runaround.”

## **Behavioral Health Needs**

Several interviewees shared that many people participating in eviction court are experiencing behavioral health needs. These needs were viewed as being very serious, often exacerbated by the stress of going through eviction proceedings. The social work navigator explained,



One of the really critical pieces about having social work in the navigation program is the ability to really work with the people who [need a more clinical degree of support]. The mental health, the drug and alcohol... It's pretty serious what people experience when they come to court and what they're already experiencing day to day... I've made direct referrals to mobile crisis when a tenant was psychotic and was not able to participate or should not really have been participating in their own case. [I've provided crisis care for] someone who was imminently suicidal.

The social work navigator further elaborated that, as a social worker, she has an opportunity and responsibility to offer support beyond sharing basic resources as instances of people needing mental health support in court are not rare. She feels that by finding opportunities to talk with people, she can get them the help they need.

In addition to preexisting behavioral health needs, the proceedings, especially when they end in eviction, can contribute to acute mental health crises. One court navigator shared that sometimes, people behave erratically and even threaten violence. She explained,





I never thought someone would do that at court because there's cops here, but it can get tense. I can understand. I'm at a point now, I can understand why they feel that way ... like, 'Hey, I'm losing my home,' [then] you could feel like you're losing your life, you're losing everything.

In such circumstances, the social work navigator can help calm them down and work with them to develop a plan for their next steps.

## **Housing and Social Service Needs**

Many people who come to eviction court need resources such as legal aid, financial aid, housing services, or mediation services. For example, one court personnel mentioned that “90% of the cases we have [in court] experience financial issues regarding their rental.” Another shared that people attending eviction court often, “have other needs as far as how to find other housing, or they may have counseling needs, financial needs, things like that.” In fact, one court personnel expressed that nearly every person who comes to eviction court needs help related to their housing situation – either to keep their housing or to find alternate housing. Providers of rental assistance, legal aid, financial aid, and mediation services have tables set up in the hallway outside the eviction courtroom, making them easily accessible to those attending court. However, in the stress and confusion of eviction court proceedings, people often overlook these resources or are unsure which will best meet their needs. Court navigators help by talking with people about their situation and directing them to the appropriate resources. One person shared the benefit of having a navigator direct her to mediation services available in the court, “I got a lot of information I didn't have, and we were able to make an agreement on our move-out date. Things like that was just what we wanted. I mean, basically we came here to get more time to move out and we got it.”

## Court-Related Anxiety

Many people who received navigator services described their eviction court experience as “very nerve-wracking, anxiety-high, and stressful,” causing them to feel “tense.” They appreciated the navigators’ efforts to calm them down. As one person explained, “I’m very anxious and all over the place right now, so I really appreciate those soothing reminders to just relax.”

Beyond the stress of the potential eviction, confusion and lack of information can be sources of anxiety for people involved in eviction court. One person who got services from the navigator described how, on the day of his hearing, he left important papers at home but that a court navigator helped him “because she did everything. She gave me all the information I needed pertaining to my case.” Another person shared that their interaction with the navigator was “a bit comforting because I was already stressed and anxiety-high, but they let me know what I needed to do.”

The social work navigator shared that she offers her office as a quiet, private space for people to use if needed. She said that the office is often used as a private place for difficult conversations and space for people to deescalate and regroup. Additionally, the office is “also used as a diaper changing room because I’m like, ‘Look. If you need to nurse your baby, change a baby, you need some privacy, our office is available.’ We really try to make it as [person] centered as possible.”



## PROCESS FOR INVOLVEMENT

As seen in FIGURE 1, the process for involvement with a navigator generally unfolds in three stages: 1) referral to the navigator, 2) first contact, and 3) connection to services.

## **Stage 1: Referral**

The social work navigator gets referrals from a variety of sources, including magistrate, court navigators, and service providers. A magistrate may call the social work navigator into the courtroom to work with a particular person, explain their situation, and request that the social work navigator meet with them. The court navigators also regularly refer people to the social work navigator if someone has a more complex need or seems to be particularly distressed. Service providers located in the hallway of the eviction court also will refer people to the social work navigator.

For the court navigators, referrals come primarily through outreach. The court navigators have desks set up in three locations in the lobby of the eviction court floor and greet people as they enter. People involved with eviction court can ask questions when first entering the lobby, or they can approach any of the court navigators while they are waiting for their case to be called. Bailiffs occasionally refer people who do not have the necessary information for their hearing or if they have questions.

## **Stage 2: First Contact**

The initial meeting with the social work navigator varies based on the person's needs. Some people only require a quick referral to a service within the court. Others with more complex needs require a comprehensive intake, which includes screening questions to assess the risk of suicide, immediate homelessness, and other concerns. The purpose of this intake process is to guide the social work navigator's recommendations. The intake is intended to feel conversational in nature so as not to be intimidating or overwhelming.

Court navigators greet people as they enter the hallway of the eviction court and ask preliminary questions about their needs. During this brief encounter, the court navigators check if individuals have the necessary paperwork, answer any questions about the process, and provide directions. One of the navigators described their typical interactions with people,



Sometimes people [attending court] aren't aware of the full process. So ... we'll [the court navigators] just try to help them and walk them through the process. We'll tell them where to go, who to get with. They'll check in with the courtroom and then we'll let them know ... come get with us for resources here that may be able to help with the case. Even if it's a property manager or landlord, we'll let them know about resources here that may can help them.

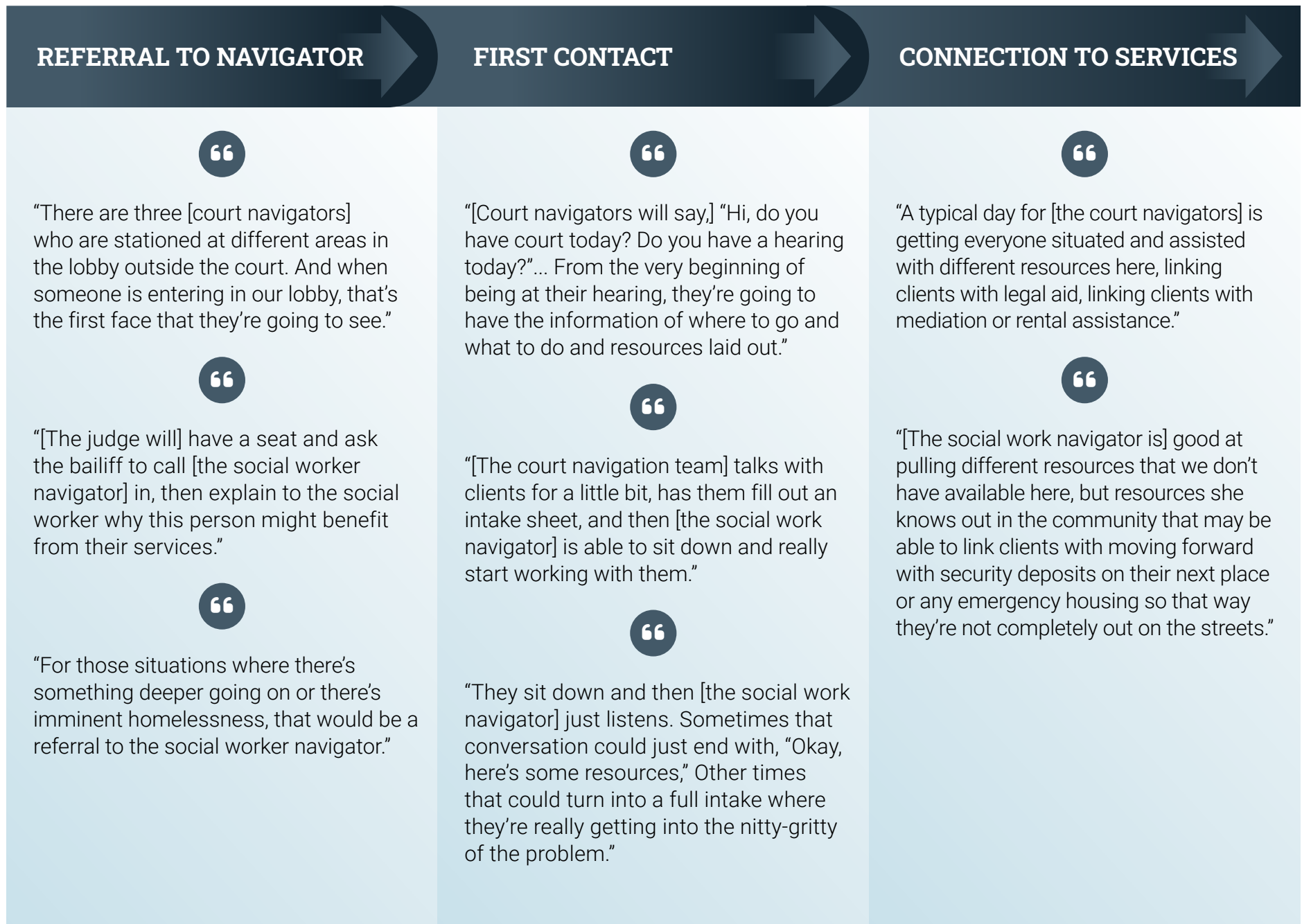
If the court navigators determine someone could benefit from speaking with the social work navigator, they collect contact and case information on a paper form before making the connection. This process is only followed for referrals to the social work navigator, as the other service providers have their own intake procedures.

### **Stage 3: Connection to Services**

Both the social work and court navigators make referrals to services. The court navigators primarily refer to services located in the hallway of the eviction court. The social work navigator has a network of resources, which includes community-based rental assistance programs, short-term housing, and behavioral health treatment providers.

None of the navigators conduct a formal follow-up after connecting people to services. However, the court navigators shared that it is common for people to stop and talk with them at the end of their case to let the court navigators know how it went and to share the outcome of their connection to resources. The social work navigator often asks people to follow up with her; she tells people that she would like to know whether their connection with the agency worked out so she can celebrate with them if it did or figure out what other options they have if it did not. She also invites this feedback so that she can learn and adjust her referral process.

**FIGURE 3: Quotes Characterizing the Process for Involvement with the Navigators: Franklin County, Ohio**



## BENEFITS

All interviewees described examples of the navigators' benefits. Navigator benefits fall into two categories: 1) aiding court personnel, 2) aiding people coming to court

### Aiding Court Personnel

The social worker and court navigators aid court personnel by helping to organize the eviction court process and alleviating their workloads. First, the navigators have helped to standardize the way people are directed around the floor and referred to resources, organizing the activity on the floor. By asking people about their needs related to the eviction proceeding before their hearing begins, navigators also help hearings proceed smoothly. For example, navigators may learn that a person needs an interpreter before they go into the courtroom and can arrange to have one present.

Second, navigators aid court personnel by alleviating some of their workload. One court personnel described the responsibilities of courtroom staff,



We're responsible for making sure that we know where people are, where they're located, if they're out in the hallway, if they've checked in, we call the cases, we order interpreters for that day as they're needed. So, there's a lot of information that has to be kept track of, along with calling the cases, scheduling cases, scanning them, documenting what happened.

This person went on to explain, "if people had questions we were the first available people to come find, and so we would have to stop what

we're doing a lot of times to look up their information, to find their case number, to tell them where they're supposed to be." Even though staff wanted to answer questions, it was hard for them to do this without slowing down the docket. Having the navigators is helpful because now, "a lot of that gets taken care of before they even get into us."

## **Aiding People Coming to Court**

The social worker and court navigators aid people coming to court by providing directions and information, pointing out the resources available to people in the court hallway, and connecting people to additional resources in the community. First, the navigators provide directions and information about the eviction court process. One court personnel explained that people coming to eviction court are "expected to know a lot ... if they don't have an attorney with them and there are pro se people coming in, they're expected to know where they're supposed to go and kind of have all the information." However, several interviewees expressed that it is unfair to expect people to know how to navigate the eviction court process themselves. The navigators help rectify this unfair expectation by giving people, "a sketch of what they need to do." The social work navigator echoed that all the navigators attempt to make being in eviction court less emotionally painful by orienting people to the space so that in their state of crisis, they can focus on their case without the added burden of being confused about where to go or who to speak to. Another court personnel explained that having navigators to help tenants provides,



A little bit of a level setting, a little bit of equalizing ... Because there's a lot of advantages that people have when they are at eviction court every day, and they know the process like the back of their hand, they have the relationships, they know the format of the building, they know who the people are that work there. There's a lot of institutional advantages to landlords who are frequently there, and the navigators and the social workers are great at kind of level setting.

Nearly every person we interviewed who was participating in eviction court hearings appreciated having the navigators to give them information and answer questions. One person explained that the navigators “were really nice and friendly, and they knew what they were talking about.” Another person shared that her interaction with the navigators was “A bit comforting because I was already stressed and anxiety-high, but they let me know what I needed to do.”

Second, the navigators direct people to resources available in the hallway outside of the eviction courtroom so that people do not miss them. One person attending eviction court shared that, without the court navigators to point her to the resources, she “probably would've walked right by [the tables] and went to court not knowing.” A service provider who works at one of the tables echoed the value of having navigators point people to the resources saying, “You come up here and ... there's no clear point person to talk to and no relationship between the agencies to direct people [like], ‘Oh, it sounds like this may be the right spot for you.’ A lot of people fell through the cracks.” This changed when the court navigator position was put in place to triage people's needs and point them to the specific resources that can help them.

Third, the social work navigator connects people to resources in the community that may address other needs besides those related to their eviction case. As one court personnel explained, “People ... may have more than one need. The immediate need is handling the eviction case they're here for, but they may have other needs as far as how to find other housing, or they may have counseling needs, financial needs, things like that.” The social work navigator is particularly concerned with connecting people to housing resources so that, even if an eviction cannot be prevented, a person can leave with a plan for accessing housing assistance.



# Recovery Support Navigators—Massachusetts



## OVERVIEW

Project NORTH currently includes 15 Recovery Support Navigators who provide services in 10 counties across the state of Massachusetts. Each Navigator generally covers one county, with two Navigators covering a couple of counties. Navigators are employed by community-based behavioral health agencies. Most are in courthouses, though a few are in Community Justice Support Centers. These Centers are near courthouses and provide services for people who are involved in the legal system. In this section, we describe the goals, onboarding, supervision, general workflow, and referral networks of Recovery Support Navigators.

### Goals

The Recovery Support Navigators' goals are to increase engagement and retention in behavioral health treatment, decrease the risk of overdose, and reduce the risk of additional legal-system involvement for the people to whom they provide services. Several Navigators summarized these goals by saying they aimed to put people "on a path for success." One Navigator explained, "our job is to make sure we put [people] on that track to be successful, and we want to be able to point them in the right direction to the resources that they're going to need to be successful."

Supervisors emphasized the goal of engaging people in treatment, sharing that being in the courthouse allows Navigators to meet people's needs "sooner rather than later." One supervisor said, "we want someone who can hold [a person's] hand to access treatment faster. People are dying at excessive rates. So, if you can get someone in [the] moment, and the court is what's going to help motivate them, that's what we want." Navigators can begin to convince people to consider treatment by providing "that introduction, that connection" and explaining what

to expect when they go for treatment “to minimize some of the scaries that can come with not knowing.”

At the same time, Navigators acknowledged that not everyone is ready for treatment. In these cases, Navigators aimed to “plant seeds” and to be easily accessible so that a person could return to them for help when ready. As one Navigator explained, “You never know; you may say one thing that will stick with somebody. And whether or not you’re able to connect them to care, at least you’re setting them on the right path and being just a constant support no matter what.” A supervisor echoed this describing Navigators as “an information source” to whom court-involved people and their families can always return. Navigators endorsed their role as educators, both in relation to treatment resources and the court process. Several Navigators expressed wanting to help break “the stigmatization of court” by being a friendly, helpful resource.

Overall, Recovery Support Navigators aim to put people on the path to success by engaging them in treatment and reducing their risk of overdose or future legal system involvement. For those not ready for treatment, Navigators aim to plant seeds and be available if or when a person returns and is ready to be connected to treatment resources.

## **Onboarding**

Recovery Support Navigators roles have been implemented in a staged fashion across Massachusetts since Project NORTH began in 2022. Some Navigators have been in their role for a little over two years, while others are new to the role. Additionally, some counties have already experienced turnover, while others have maintained the same Navigator since implementation.

## **Hiring Considerations**

Recovery Support Navigator is a bachelors-level role. Supervisors shared that, when they were hiring for the role, they were looking for people who were motivated, energetic, and passionate about working with a court-involved population. Additionally, having connections in the community, or the ability to build connections, is critical. One supervisor shared, “We were looking for somebody familiar with the community, familiar with

resources in the community, and the energy and ability to even seek more resources, and kind of hit the streets, and do knocks on doors to actually really make those grassroots connections.” Supervisors recognized that a person may not have all the necessary connections initially so they prioritized hiring people who could reach out and find connections and who were willing to collaborate with “any and every resource because we never know what [a] person is going to need.” Supervisors were also interested in hiring people who had some familiarity with substance use disorders and the range of treatment options available, including those options that take a harm reduction approach.

Other important skills included the ability to work independently, comfort working with court personnel, and willingness to approach court-involved people and engage them in discussions about substance use and treatment. Finally, one supervisor shared that the Navigator she hired is bilingual in English and Spanish, something that has been an asset in allowing this Navigator to work more closely with the Spanish-speaking population that comes to court.

### **Prior Experience**

Recovery Support Navigators described a wide range of prior experience demonstrating that people with many different professional backgrounds are appropriate for this role. While some came to the Navigator role straight out of school, many had been in the field for several years or even several decades. Navigators’ prior roles included housing specialist, family support worker, addiction resource coordinator, social worker, and reentry case manager among others. Navigators worked for behavioral health agencies, hospitals, courts, law firms, community resource centers, the Department of Child and Family Services, and nonprofits. In this way, many Navigators came to the role with connections in the community and experience working with people who had behavioral health needs. A few Navigators also have lived experience of addiction, a valuable perspective that they bring to their work supporting others.

Court actors emphasized the value of these experiences. One court actor explained,



I know she came from working within the recovery community, and she knows people. ... She knows most of the sober houses in our area, she knows the directors of the sober houses. ... I think definitely finding someone like that because it streamlines the process, you're not having to come in and train someone.

Another court actor further explained that, because it takes a long time to build up a network of connections, it is easier to hire a Navigator who has an existing network. At the same time, supervisors shared that it is not always possible to hire Navigators with prior experience and that there can be benefits to hiring people who have recently graduated and who bring energy, excitement, and a fresh perspective on the work. One supervisor explained, “Actually, our first hire for one of our locations was somebody who was pretty new out of school, but had that energy, had the excitement in working with the justice-involved population, had the willingness to make those [community] connections.”

### **Onboarding Process**

After applying for the job, Recovery Support Navigators were interviewed by the behavioral health agency where the role is housed and then by the Project NORTH Program Manager. Some Navigators shared that there was a slight gap in time between when they were hired and when they began, which afforded some time to develop or expand their referral networks and to become familiar with the court system.

Several Navigators were trained by a prior Navigator who was leaving the role or had the opportunity to shadow Navigators from nearby counties. Shadowing other Navigators was seen as particularly helpful as the shadowed Navigators gave the “the ins and outs” of the role and shared their resources and connections. During onboarding, Navigators also met the court actors with whom they would be working. Some court actors described taking the time to walk Navigators around the court, introduce them to people, and describe the role so court personnel would know to

refer people to the Navigator. Navigators expressed feeling prepared and ready to step into the role at the end of the onboarding process.

## **Supervision**

Recovery Support Navigators have two sources of supervision: 1) the Project NORTH program manager, and 2) clinicians at their respective behavioral health agencies. Navigators meet with both supervisors weekly and can reach out as needed. Project NORTH supervision emphasizes aspects of their work related to the grant, such as the criteria that make a person eligible for services. Clinical supervision is tailored to a Navigator's level of experience. For Navigators who have been in the field a long time, supervision may involve "logistical day-to-day kind of things, talking things through, [the Navigator] really just keeping me in the loop." For Navigators with less experience, supervisors provide "more of the clinical-type supervision, like how are their interactions with individuals, transference, countertransference, keeping their cool, de-escalation, and just motivational interviewing skills." Supervisors also engage in "case study kind of supervisions" in which they discuss what Navigators did in specific interactions and possible alternate responses, as appropriate.

Most supervisors meet one-on-one with the Recovery Support Navigators though in one county, Navigators also join group supervision sessions with other providers in their behavioral health agency. The supervisor in this county shared that having the Navigator join group supervision allows them to be included in a team setting since most of their work was done independently. Several agencies also include the Navigators in the agency-wide required training sessions.

Supervisors emphasized that they are available to their supervisees as needed throughout the day and encourage supervisees to bring any issues, questions, or concerns they may have to supervision. Navigators endorsed the value of their supervision sessions. One Navigator shared that the supervision helps them deal with challenging or emotional interactions,



We're dealing with people's lives and families and children ... and it can be very emotional and heartbreaking and stressful at times. So you have to definitely have self-care and ... go to your supervisions and talk to your supervisor about some of the challenges that you may be facing. I've come across several challenges within the last couple of years here, and I definitely let both supervisors know what's going on and how I dealt with it.

## Location

Many, though not all, of the Recovery Support Navigators are in highly visible areas within the courthouses. Court actors felt this visibility was important. For example, one court actor explained that the Navigator in his court is “positioned in a table right outside of our first session, where all the business usually comes out of, and I designated one of the conference rooms we used to have for lawyers as her private office so she can have a private space.” Another explained that she will often tell people during court hearings to “Go downstairs and talk to [the navigator]” who “has a very visible table with a little sign on it.”

The Navigators' location in the courthouse also helps integrate them into the larger court workgroup. As one court actor explained, “what we have found is [the Navigator is] not an ancillary service, they're a part of the court.” Another described how, in his court, the Navigator often works as a team with the specialty court clinicians to coordinate access to services and care. Echoing this sentiment a third expressed, “I do believe having them daily in the court, being a part of the court system, so to speak, is more important than having them offsite because... [if they were located offsite] it would be difficult to coordinate [with them].”

Some Navigators are stationed within Community Justice Centers located near the courthouse. These Centers offer a wide range of services for people involved in the legal system, including services like treatment groups, parenthood classes, and financial management sessions, among others.

## Referral Network

The value of networking was emphasized across focus groups. The Recovery Support Navigators' networks are critical to their ability to efficiently connect people to community resources. One Navigator explained, "[a] navigator really needs to know the community, strongly know the community, because a big part of this ... you're directing people to services that are mostly in the community that you're in." Another Navigator shared,



It also helps tremendously making connections, mainly with treatment facilities like Detox or any CSS [Clinical Stabilization Services] or whatnot, because once we make those connections, we're able to bypass a little bit of the bureaucracy and documentation. They're just a call away. ... If you need a MAT [Medication Assisted Treatment], then I'll call my connection because we've developed such a good rapport that all she has to do is see if there's an appointment instead of me having to call the line, having to wait, which is another stressor for the client. So those are just ways of us building within the community so we could be able to reduce the barriers of connecting individuals to the resources they need.

One court actor shared how impressed she was with the network of the Navigator in her court: "I mean she'll know that 10 minutes ago some staff member left and so there's not as many beds or staffing available. I mean, it's incredible how much she has her finger on the pulse of programs, and I think that's all about relationships."

All Recovery Support Navigators shared that networking with service providers was one of their first priorities upon being hired. One Navigator explained, "The first thing I knew that I had to do based on the role was go

out to the providers in the area, some of whom I knew, some of whom I didn't know, because I know I'm going to need treatment hits. So, I made the rounds." Time for networking is built into the role: Project NORTH encourages Navigators to spend time in the community introducing themselves to treatment agencies and other resources. To demonstrate one Navigator described, "I did a lot of community outreach outside the court. I would go to different programs and meet with people and hear what they were offering. I would also tell them about Project NORTH. I built those relationships ... and I'm always networking."

In addition to service providers, Recovery Support Navigators network with each other. One Navigator shared, "I use Project NORTH, too, as a resource. If there's something I don't know, I will reach out to other [navigators]." Indeed, Navigators may be particularly likely to connect when working with a court-involved individual who resides in another Navigator's county.

Recovery Support Navigators also network within the courthouse to ensure that judges, attorneys, and other court personnel know who they are and know to refer people to them for services. One Navigator described her courthouse networking efforts,



Within the court, I'm always just walking around. ... And I've built some really good relationships with people [in the courthouse], whether it's in probation, in the clerk's office, even the court officers and the judges. So a lot of times the court officers will, when people are being released, [court officers are] hearing situations that they're in and [court officers will] be like, "Oh, you should go meet with [the navigator]." ... So I feel like I have just been talking about what I do a lot and building close relationships with people [in the courthouse] and in the community.



Court actors also emphasized the importance of Recovery Support Navigators building relationships within the court and often assist with these connections when a Navigator is hired. One court actor mentioned organizing training for lawyers to introduce them to the Navigator and clarify referral processes. Another court actor described personally introducing the Navigator to judges and attorneys. Navigators work with anyone at the courthouse, but one Navigator highlighted close collaboration with clinicians from treatment and mental health courts, with whom he shares office space. This proximity has been beneficial, as clinicians have shared their referral networks. Navigators strive to be familiar faces in the courthouse and community through networking and outreach, which helps them secure referrals and connect people to community resources quickly.

## NEEDS CONSIDERED

Recovery Support Navigators focus on identifying people’s behavioral health needs, particularly their substance use-related needs. However, they also consider social service needs and needs related to minimizing court-related stress and anxiety.

### **Behavioral Health Needs**

Recovery Support Navigators work primarily with people who are experiencing needs related to substance use and connect them to treatment facilities in the community. Interviewees shared that sober living facilities, detox facilities, and agencies that complete substance use and mental health evaluations are some of the most requested service connections. One person who had received services from a Navigator endorsed the Navigator’s ability to help people with substance use-related needs saying, “I think anybody struggling with addiction is a great candidate ... because there’s a lot of people that are just dying from drug addiction and it’s sad to say so many lives have been lost.”

Recovery Support Navigators also consider needs related to co-occurring mental and substance use disorders. Navigators may connect people with mental health needs to services such as community crisis stabilization facilities, primary care physicians, and their local Community Justice Support Centers. A Navigator shared an experience with a person who had needs related to housing, substance use, and mental health. The person sought rental assistance for a sober home after facing eviction and imminent homelessness. The Navigator identified additional mental health needs during their interaction and developed a plan to address all three issues.



So a client came in, he was like, ‘Oh, I need funding. I need funding...’ But I realized that the reason why he wanted to go into a sober home was because he was like, ‘I’m going to get evicted...’ But I could see his mental health was way worse than him needing a sober house... So I said, ‘So why don’t you do this? Why don’t you let me transport you to emergency mental health services because I can see you’re very anxious and you’re telling me that you haven’t been on your medications? And seeing that you have to be out of your place on May 1st, and today is April 29th, let’s get you in there. While you’re in there getting better, you keep in contact with me ... and then we could take you directly from [the mental health facility] over [to the sober house].’ ... So I just worked on that and he was able to go and he contacted me a month later that he was doing well and wanted to continue with his treatment.

Recovery Support Navigators emphasized the importance of “meeting people where they are” and understanding their needs and goals through conversation. One Navigator recalled asking a person, “What’s your end game? What do you want to accomplish?” to encourage long-term

planning. They also highlighted the need for patience when people experience setbacks in their treatment or recovery. As one Navigator noted, “Setbacks are common, and that’s okay.” Another Navigator reassured people, saying, “It’s okay to have setbacks. What matters is getting back up and using the resources available to help you get back on track.”

## **Social Service Needs**

Recovery Support Navigators address various social service needs, such as housing, obtaining documents, and employment. Many interviewees noted that nearly everyone seeking help from Navigators needs housing assistance, either to find housing or maintain it. One court personnel observed that even those needing substance use treatment often prioritize housing. Navigators can provide short-term rental assistance through Project NORTH for sober homes and refer people to other housing services.

A Recovery Support Navigator shared that many people lack an ID, which is crucial because, as she put it, “you need your ID to be able to get to work. You need your ID for anything.” She collaborates with a reentry program to obtain IDs and has a contact at City Hall to get birth certificates for those born in the county. Once IDs are secured, she helps with other connections. Navigators also frequently assist with employment. One explained, “If [a person is] willing to come in and sit down, I have lists of jobs that are felon-friendly, so I will sit with them and try to talk to them about what their plan is, what’s next?” Another reported success in helping several people find jobs at Home Depot.

Other social service needs that Recovery Support Navigators address may include transportation, food, and clothing. They may be particularly likely to focus on social service needs when a person is not ready to consider behavioral health treatment. In these cases, one navigator explained, “What we can do is we can listen and provide what we can, whether it’s clothing, whether it’s food, whether it’s just an ear or some water.”

## Minimizing Court-Related Stress and Anxiety

Several interviewees expressed concern that coming to the courthouse can be stressful. One Recovery Support Navigator said, “There’s a stigmatization with going into court with it being super intimidating, open cases that you’re dealing with, if it’s a family that has multiple proceedings, whatever the case is.” Navigators noted that this stress negatively affects how people present when working with them. One Navigator shared



Individuals can come in in not the best space because they’re dealing with crisis, right? They’re dealing with – it could be a family member passed away or it could be someone recently had an overdose, or their child got taken away, they’re involved in DCS/ DCF [Department of Children and Families] and it could just be a lot of different factors, right? So, you have to really be non-judgmental, and you have to really carry yourself in a manner where you’re there for the client and not take it personal sometimes when they can come at you in a manner that doesn’t seem so nice.

Addressing court-related anxiety is often a necessary first step before tackling behavioral health or social service needs. One Navigator recalled a person who was “super frantic about his court cases.” Before starting intake, the Navigator helped him navigate his court issues and noticed “his whole demeanor relaxed” afterward.



## PROCESS FOR INVOLVEMENT

While Recovery Support Navigators share that they respond individually to meet each person’s unique needs, they do follow

a general pattern when working with a given person. This pattern typically unfolds in four stages: 1) referral to a navigator, 2) intake, 3) connection to services, and 4) follow-up with the navigator.

## **Stage 1: Referral**

The process of getting connected to Recovery Support Navigators starts with a referral. The primary sources of referral vary across counties but generally come from three sources: 1) self-referrals and navigator outreach, 2) court and probation, and 3) the community.

The first source includes self-referrals and outreach. In courthouses, Recovery Support Navigators have accessible tables where people can seek their assistance. Navigators leave contact info when away and often receive subsequent calls for services. They also engage in outreach, attending court proceedings to identify those who might benefit from Project NORTH's services (see Figure 1).

The second source of referrals is court and probation. Navigators build strong relationships with probation officers, clerks, and judges, leading to many referrals, especially from judges. Probation officers also refer people needing help with treatment, and court personnel from specialty courts may seek Navigators' assistance in connecting individuals to services.

The third source of referrals is the community. Navigators may get referrals from the community, including from other providers in the agency that employs the Navigators and from family members who request help for themselves or their kin.

## **Stage 2: Intake**

After receiving a referral, Recovery Support Navigators will set up an intake with the person. This intake may happen immediately upon meeting someone or may be scheduled for the future. The intake may also take place in person or over the phone, depending on the specifics of the person's situation. The aim of the intake is to gather as much information as possible from the person, including their contact details, demographic information, case background, and specific needs. This information is recorded in a database, allowing the Navigator to refer

back to it when needed. During this intake, Navigators also obtain a signed release form, which permits them to communicate with service providers, lawyers, and other relevant parties on a person's behalf. This communication may be necessary when setting up an appointment for someone or relaying to a probation officer that a person has received services. Notably, a person can refuse to sign the release form. Navigators may still work with the person when this happens, but they cannot share information with providers or court personnel on the person's behalf.

Recovery Support Navigators shared that they strive to make this intake process conversational and less intimidating. Accordingly, people who received Navigator services described the intake meeting as both informative and calming, helping to ease their concerns and build trust from the outset.

### **Stage 3: Connection to Services**

Recovery Support Navigators refer people to various service providers in the community, including local housing agencies and behavioral health agencies that provide medication-assisted treatment, counseling services, detox centers, and sober living communities. As noted earlier, Navigators also connect people to social services for assistance obtaining state identification cards or employment support, for example. These referrals can be internal, where Navigators connect someone to services within their own agency, or external, where they connect someone to outside agencies.

### **Stage 4: Follow Up**

Recovery Support Navigators follow up with a person twice after providing services—one day and one week later. They may engage in additional follow-ups as needed. People who previously received services from a Navigator reported having regular check-ins to assess their progress and needs. Navigators also provide their contact information so people can reach out for further support when needed.

**FIGURE 4: Quotes Characterizing the Process for Involvement with the Navigator: Massachusetts**





## BENEFITS

All interviewees described benefits to having the Recovery Support Navigators that generally fell into one of three categories: 1) aiding court personnel, 2) aiding people coming to court, and 3) bridging the gap between the criminal legal and behavioral health systems.

### Navigators Aid Court Actors

Court actors expressed gratefulness at the workload burden lifted by the Recovery Support Navigators. One court actor described how the Navigator supports the specialty courts by working with clinicians to find resources and refer people to treatment. Another shared that probation officers in her court “utilize the navigator every day” to help them with treatment conditions tied to probation or pretrial release. The court actor explained that conditions may include,



Submitting to mental health evaluations, submitting to substance use evaluations, complying with certain treatment recommendations. So that has been the bulk of what our navigator has provided tremendous assistance with, because before we had [the navigator], a lot of what my POs [probation officers] struggled with is maintaining that connection between probation and then the community treatment providers.

A court actor responsible for connecting people to treatment expressed appreciation for the Navigator’s help when she hit a “dead end” finding resources. She would check if the Navigator knew of other options. She also relied on the Navigator when urgent needs arose (e.g., a relapse or release condition violation) and she couldn’t address them due to



other duties. Navigators agreed, aiming to be a “support system for court personnel ... from janitorial to probation to judges.”

## **Navigators Aid People Coming to Court**

Recovery Support Navigators are available to everyone coming to court, offering immediate services and opportunities that might not otherwise be available. Court actors stressed the value of Navigators being accessible to all, not just specialty court participants, with no waiting period. They also appreciated the Navigators’ ability to speak honestly and clearly about recovery and treatment options. As one court actor explained,



It’s an incredible resource to have somebody right there. And the delivery of services is instant. You don’t have to wait. You don’t have to say, “Okay, well let’s set up a meeting,” or, “Why don’t you go over here or there.” It’s right there with someone who speaks the language and is able to talk to them about what real recovery looks like and what the best program might be for them.

People who had received services from Recovery Support Navigators were enthusiastic about their experiences and described how the Navigators gave them access to opportunities they may not have had otherwise. One woman expressed that the Navigator she worked with was “very understanding ... it was a great interaction” and shared her gratitude for the Navigator’s help setting her on a path to success,



And it wasn't even just about getting me into a sober house ... I was there for almost two years, and then now for the first time in my life, I have my own apartment. I have a career that I'm working on. None of that was attainable or imaginable to me two and a half years ago. So it's much more than just getting me into a sober house, to have somewhere to live. That was definitely helpful, one hundred percent, but just everything that opened the doors for after that moment too.

Similarly, a man who was supported by a Recovery Support Navigator shared that he could not “say enough about [the navigator].” He recalled a time when he was at the courthouse for one of many hearings and the Navigator,



Saw me frustrated and she was like, oh my God, she was like, ‘don't worry about it. We got this.’ Because it was a frustrating process for me ... but like I said, [the Navigator] was able to bridge the gap the way she eloquently spoke to me and just put everything in just the simplest terms ... I started to have hope. I started to have hope in my life and I'm so grateful for her. She's awesome.

The Recovery Support Navigators were passionate about working with people who are involved in the legal system and who are in or working toward recovery. One Navigator disclosed, “I love it. I love having an opportunity to speak to someone that's newly in recovery or newly coming back to recovery, right? It reinvigorates me. I speak from my heart. I try to be as genuine as I can with the client, knowing where they're coming from with lived experience.”

## Navigators Bridge the Gap Between Systems


Several interviewees noted that the Recovery Support Navigators bridge the gap between the criminal legal and behavioral health system by coordinating between court-involved people, court actors, and service providers. One court actor shared that, before the Navigators, people court-ordered to receive mental health evaluations often struggled to follow through with appointments:



[People] come out of court, they're court ordered to submit to this evaluation. We [probation] have them sign a release, but we say, "Okay, go to [Service Provider] for the walk-in hours Monday through Friday between eight and five." And then we would lose them because they would go, they would do the intake, and then we require them to come back with verification that they completed the intake, and then they're given follow-up appointments for the assessments to be completed. And where the disconnection was, was that soft handoff between the person reporting for the intake, having the evaluation, and then obtaining the results of that evaluation, and then the referrals for treatment.

The Navigator is now involved in the process, helping schedule appointments, confirming their completion, and informing probation. By managing appointments and keeping everyone informed, the Navigator reduces the burden on both probation and the court-involved person.

Recovery Support Navigators also help improve communication between court actors and service providers, as these parties often use different language and terms. One court actor shared, "a letter came in from an agency... it was unclear if the person completed an assessment or just an intake, and what the treatment recommendations were." While it would take a probation officer hours to contact the clinician, the



Navigator quickly called and clarified the situation. Another court actor noted that the clinical language in letters can be hard to understand, but that Navigators bridge this gap by translating or reaching out for clarification, making them “a huge support for the court.”

## Criminal Justice Liaisons—Tennessee



### OVERVIEW

The Criminal Justice Liaisons (CJL) Program currently includes 34 CJLs and 13 case managers who support the CJLs in providing services across the state of Tennessee. The state contracts with 11 community-based behavioral health agencies who employ and supervise the CJLs assigned to cover all counties across the state. In this section, we describe the goals, onboarding process, general workflow, and referral networks of CJLs.

### Goals

Several people described the main goal of the CJL position to be reducing recidivism by helping people involved in the legal system get access to needed services in the community. One CJL summarized her goal as, “To make sure that [people] don't end up back in the system. That's our ultimate goal, to provide [people] any resources they need to get sober and stay sober.” Another echoed this goal and expressed the importance of helping people to stabilize on medications, “Yeah, the ultimate goal is to reduce recidivism. We want people to get into services, we want people to get stable on their medication, and we want people to have stable housing.”

In support of this goal, CJLs reflected that they felt they had been successful in working with someone if that person was connected to services and was able to get to the service facility. CJLs expressed that even when they get someone accepted to a facility, the person does not always make it there, especially when they are going to the facility upon release from jail. One CJL shared, “I've had a couple of cases like that, which just kind of make me sad, but I can't force you to do anything. So the fact that they get where they [need to] go is the biggest indicator [of success].” CJLs also felt they had been successful when they followed

up with someone and found that they were housed, employed, not using substances, or were reconnected with their families.

A few additional goals were also mentioned during interviews such as improving communication between people in jail and the jail staff to ease tension and ensure that people's needs are met in the jail. A final goal was reducing the workload for jail and court staff. One CJL explained that her role "helps the workload of so many people, and it's just a good resource for the jail to have when they don't know what else to do."

In summary, the primary goal identified was reducing recidivism by getting people connected to services in the community. Additional goals included improving communication with the jail and reducing the workload for jail and court staff.

## **Onboarding Process**

The CJLs we spoke with had been in their roles for a period of two months to two years. While there are no specific degree requirements, most of the CJLs have bachelor's degrees in fields such as sociology, psychology, and criminal justice. CJLs came to the role with a wide range of prior experience, including working as legal assistants and case managers in medical settings, on forensic assertive community treatment (FACT) teams, as state government employees, and in jail settings. While prior experience in the legal system is not necessary, it can ease the transition into the CJL role. One CJL shared that her past legal experience helped her understand and translate legal jargon. Similarly, a court practitioner suspected that past legal experience might reduce burnout because the CJL would be familiar with working in challenging court and jail environments and comfortable managing interactions in legal settings.

Onboarding included training courses covering topics such as de-escalation, behavioral health screening tools, suicide assessment, mental health symptomology, and jail-specific training modules. Onboarding also included shadowing a supervisor or another CJL for a brief period. CJLs expressed that, while onboarding was helpful, it was important to step into the role quickly because they did not really begin to understand the position until the work began.

## **Workflow**

The CJL role is incredibly flexible by design. CJLs use this flexibility to personalize their schedules and vary their engagement strategies across counties. Each CJL provides services in one to five counties and typically spends one or two days a week onsite in each county in the jails, courts, police stations, or community meetings. CJLs develop weekly schedules specifying which days they will spend in each county to organize their time and create routines. These routines ensure that county partners know when the CJLs will be present. Weekly schedules are largely based on jail availability and demand – jails with tight schedules may only be visited once a week at a specific time, and rural jails with fewer referrals may be visited every other week. Jails with more referrals and flexibility may be visited several times a week.

CJLs spend the bulk of their time connecting people to services. However, they also engage in administrative tasks (e.g., emails, paperwork), networking activities, supervision and training, and involvement in community or court activities. The flexibility in the role is critical to juggling these tasks and to adjusting for unexpected events like a jail lockdown, an unexpected call from someone placed in services, or a community event. Overall, CJLs expressed that they prioritize people who need services and building relationships with providers in their schedules. When asked to describe a typical week one, CJL said, “I can’t tell you, and I don’t mean that rudely. I mean that as, how my Monday starts is not how my Friday is going to end.”

## **Referral Networks**

The value of networking was repeatedly emphasized across interviews. CJLs work hard to be familiar faces in courts, jails, and communities by dedicating time to networking and outreach activities. In this subsection, we first describe CJLs’ efforts to develop networks and then discuss the techniques they use to maintain their networks over time.

### **Strategies to Develop Networks**

CJLs use several strategies to connect with court and jail staff. Several CJLs shared that they participated in mental health training for court

staff during which they explained their role in detail. According to one court personnel, this training was incredibly helpful in getting court staff to refer people to the CJLs and to reach out to CJLs with questions about resources in the county. Many CJLs also collaborate with problem-solving courts (e.g., drug, recovery, and mental health courts). Through involvement in these courts, CJLs often get referrals for people who were screened for participation but were not accepted. One CJL explained, “It’s not necessarily my role that I have to go to recovery courts but doing that puts my face out there, and we’ve gotten a lot of referrals from that way. A lot of people have gotten help.” Finally, CJLs foster connections in the jail by introducing themselves to staff when they are in the jail to see people and sharing their contact information for future communication. CJLs also used several strategies to connect with law enforcement officers. For example, CJLs provide mental health training, participate in Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training, and attend regular CIT-focused meetings. One CJL shared that she did ride-alongs and made efforts to attend policing events. Another CJL developed a process of routine follow-up after an officer places a person on a mental health hold. During this follow-up, the CJL ensures the person has access to necessary medications and encourages them to consider various treatment options.

To connect with the community, CJLs take time to visit service and housing providers, especially new providers, and engage in general county-wide outreach efforts. One CJL summarized her networking efforts as follows,



So, I just really think talking to people and letting them know who you are and what the program is and being active in meetings. And, we have Walk to Remember, which is a suicide prevention [event], and just going to that and handing out cards and [going to] ribbon cuttings for other mental health or sober living homes in the area. Because if you have one opening up, a lot of times [other providers] are going to be there ... So I really think the connections and just talking to people and putting yourself out there.



CJLs also get involved in health councils, various types of coalitions (e.g., drug, recovery, mental health), and other county or community meetings. One CJL shared that these strategies are especially helpful when the jail is not as amenable to having CJLs come in and assess people. This CJL expressed that working with a coalition over time has been “what's helped me get the community on board.” CJLs shared that community-based meetings are a valuable networking avenue as they bring together a range of representatives from different resources and help CJLs to build connections with the providers to whom they refer people.

### **Strategies to Maintain Connections**

Once CJLs build their networks, they spend a good deal of time maintaining those connections. CJLs described three strategies they used to maintain their networks. First, they communicate frequently and openly with their networks. One jail staff person shared that the CJL was “on everybody’s speed dial” including the jail’s lieutenant. CJLs frequently mentioned being in “constant” communication with police in some counties and community-based service providers in other counties. One CJL shared that her regular emails with lawyers involved the lawyers making her aware of “anything and everything that happened with the person's case, ... so I could do what I needed to. So, they'll let [me] know release dates, what's going on in the case, if they need something or anything that [I] can help with.” This level of communication allows CJLs to collect the information needed on the people to whom they are providing services. It also allows them to communicate the details about a person’s wishes and the plan for placement upon release to relevant parties such as judges, lawyers, probation officers, and service providers. Regular communication also ensures CJLs are aware of changes to protocols, staff turnover, and availability of services to prevent disruptions to their workflow or their referral process.

Second, CJLs help service providers make connections to other resources to strengthen their relationships. One CJL explained,



I've had a lot of calls where, and it may not be something under my job title, but, 'Hey, we're really struggling to get in touch with this person about this thing. Do you have a contact for that?' And just by helping everyone navigate, we're all here to help people, so helping with that navigation has just built really strong relationships between all of us. Because some may not be certainly appropriate for my team, but they still need mental health services, so I can get them to the right people who can help them with that.

Service providers expressed that they call the CJLs not just to refer someone to them but also to ask for their help in locating resources. In fact, some service providers viewed their work with the CJLs to be collaborative and mutually beneficial. One jail staff person we spoke with explained,



The CJL has access to so many more resources because that is their job. They network, they find the community and they have interactions with people that I would never even have known about. So if I'm hitting a wall, I can talk to them and they can say, 'Oh, I know this person with this place, or I know this person with this place,' and that would be perfect.

Third, CJLs strengthen connections by learning the specific providers' criteria and procedures. This awareness facilitates the referral process and speeds up acceptance into a program. CJLs reported knowing each program's waitlist times, intake criteria, insurance requirements, program components, and completion criteria. As a result, CJLs can be certain they are referring people to the best program based on their situation and interests. Additionally, familiarity with service providers allows the

providers to feel confident that the people referred by CJLs will be well suited for the program. As one CJL explained, “Because of my strong relationship ... [service providers] know that everything will be streamlined. They know that I’m going to check in. They know that they can trust my judgment on if I feel [a person would] be a good fit for that place.” A service provider echoed this sentiment when talking about a different CJL and said, “A lot of times, she knows our program, she knows kind of our criteria and what we take. ... It makes it real easy for us.”

CJLs put a great deal of effort into creating and maintaining wide networks from whom they get referrals and to whom they refer people for services. CJLs build their networks by providing or participating in trainings, collaborating with problem-solving courts, introducing themselves and sharing contact information at every opportunity, engaging in ride-alongs with law enforcement, following up on mental health holds, visiting service and housing providers, and attending a wide variety of community meetings and events. CJLs maintain their networks by communicating frequently, helping others make connections, and being familiar with service providers’ criteria and procedures. CJLs saw networking as an integral part of their work. One CJL, when offering advice to anyone considering this role, expressed, “My advice is just, in order for you to do the job, ... if you are comfortable going into a room of people you don’t know, do it because that’s how you’re going to create your position.”

## NEEDS CONSIDERED

CJLs focus on identifying people’s behavioral health needs. However, they also consider social service needs and a person’s legal context as they develop release plans. In this section, we discuss the needs and legal contexts considered by CJLs.

## Behavioral Health Needs

CJLs work with people involved in the legal system who are experiencing needs related to substance use, mental illness, or co-occurring disorders and connect them to treatment facilities in the community. CJLs will connect people to outpatient, clinic-based settings or settings that involve a housing component based on whether a person needs housing. CJLs expressed that treatment in combination with housing (e.g., transitional housing, group homes) is requested more often. In addition to connecting people to treatment, CJLs prioritize continuity in access to psychiatric medication to prevent people from destabilizing due to a lapse in medication compliance. One CJL explained,



If [a person is] on mental health medications when they're in the jail, I try to make sure that they continue those services ... And in a lot of rural areas, they follow up with their PCP [primary care provider], but I try to push mental health services counseling. If they don't have to do rehab ... like, 'You've been in jail for a little while. What about some IOP?'

## Social Service Needs

CJLs shared that they connect people to resources for social service needs nearly as often as they connect them to treatment. One CJL explained,



It is really intensive, people getting out, and these systems are not meant to be easy. People cannot navigate Social Security .... or even get set up to let [that agency] know that they're out of jail. They have to have that release paperwork. It's just all these different communications that aren't happening, and then you expect someone who's starting over from square one or maybe is just getting used to their meds or not on meds, to navigate all of these things.

Many social service needs described by CJLs relate to challenges with accessing services, such as (lack of) access to transportation, especially in rural communities with limited (or no) public transportation. CJLs regularly set up transportation from jail to service facilities or called housing facilities to inform staff about an upcoming appointment that they had arranged for a person to ensure the person had help with transportation.

Two other challenges are a lack of financial resources needed to pay the deposit to enroll in a program and a lack of official documents (e.g., driver's license, social security cards) required for some services and employment. To help address these barriers, CJLs have access to funding that is available via the CJL program budget and can be used to cover a wide range of needs. Funding may be used to pay for sober living assistance, basic supplies, medication management and co-pays, prepaid phones and phone card assistance, photo ID, driver license, & birth certificate assistance or replacement, utility assistance, public transportation, emergency food/shelter, and hygiene products. This funding is used to pay for the needed service and is not paid directly to a person receiving services. The funding must be used to meet the most immediate clinical or recovery support need for which there is no other source of funding. The intention for this funding is to alleviate barriers to initiation or continuation of treatment, decrease the likelihood of incarceration, and provide immediate assistance to those leaving incarceration. In addition to using their available funding, CJLS also spend time with people trying to help them connect with

Social Security and other relevant agencies when necessary. Across interviews, everyone acknowledged the importance of helping people meet social service needs to increase their success in treatment.

## Legal Context

While CJLs do not provide legal aid or advice, they do need to be aware of the details of a person's case to connect a person to services and develop a release plan. Specifically, CJLs need to know a person's charges and release date, if they are incarcerated, as these inform the types of services that will be available to someone. Several CJLs expressed how difficult it can be to place someone with sex offense charges but emphasized that they will not turn someone away based on their charges. Additionally, CJLs are often aware of whether a person will be released from jail under community supervision with conditions. This information helps CJLs connect people to services that will help them meet some conditions (e.g., participation in treatment) and avoid services that might make it challenging for someone to meet other conditions (e.g., services that are physically far from probation check-ins).

In addition to being aware of a person's legal context, CJLs also collaborate directly with lawyers and probation officers and occasionally speak to judges on a person's behalf. One CJL shared an example of a time she spoke in court,



The first time I went was for one of my clients last week. I went in to just kind of listen to what's going on with his case and see if there was a release date or if he's going to be there a long time or talk to his lawyer. But they ended up asking for witnesses, and I had to get up and talk and [say], 'Hey, he is working with me to get into a program once he's out of here,' just to say he's doing something, he's not just in jail ... So that does help sometimes sway the judge on how long they have to serve or if they go somewhere instead of serving their time.

While CJLs' primary focus is behavioral health needs, they also consider social service needs and legal context to ensure that these factors do not serve as barriers preventing successful connection to behavioral health treatment facilities.



## PROCESS FOR INVOLVEMENT

While the CJL Program emphasizes individualized responses to meet each person's unique needs, CJLs do follow a consistent pattern when working with someone. This pattern typically unfolds in four stages: referral to the CJL, initial contact with the CJL, connection to services, and follow-up with the CJL. These stages may vary based on differences across counties.

### Stage 1: Referral

People are first connected to CJLs through referrals. As shown in the first column of Figure 1, referrals to CJLs come primarily from three sources: 1) self-referrals, 2) court or jail staff, and 3) the community.

#### Self-Referrals

People in jail often initiate contact with CJLs through digital kiosks located in housing units that provide incarcerated people access to a variety of services. People enter a request to see a CJL into the kiosk and the request is emailed directly to the CJL assigned to that jail. CJLs then arrange to meet with the person during their next visit to the jail.

#### Referrals From Court or Jail Staff

Several CJLs reported that court referrals stem largely from their active involvement in problem-solving courts. CJLs also shared that judges and lawyers refer people to work with a CJL, especially if the person does not qualify for participation in other court-based programs. Similarly, jail staff may refer people to a CJL if, through their interactions with the person, they believe the person would benefit from working with a CJL. One employee described how the routine screening completed

upon intake at their facility helps identify people who may benefit from speaking with a CJL, “When my screener does that needs assessment, she may pick up on some needs that this inmate may need, and she can also make a referral.”

## Community Referrals

CJL contact information is listed on a publicly accessible website, so CJLs can receive referrals from family members looking for support for their loved one. Community referrals can also come from service providers. Several CJLs get referrals from providers who report referring people to the CJL to help them develop a plan for accessing treatment upon release from jail. Finally, CJLs reported referrals from local law enforcement. As one CJL described,



If [the police] go to a house and the person gets arrested, but it may be more of a mental health type situation... They'll send me a text message over the weekend or at night or in the middle of the day or whatever and say, 'Hey, I just arrested Billy Bob, and I think that it's more of a mental health thing... can you follow up?'

## Stage 2: First Contact

After getting connected to a person, CJLs have an initial meeting with them. These meetings begin with the CJL introducing themselves and explaining what services they offer. Then CJLs ask questions on a wide range of topics, including demographic information, family history, substance use history, medical history, and questions about needs. CJLs record the answers to these questions in a centralized database. When describing the tone of this first meeting, a CJL stated, “I make it more of a conversation and just let them kind of lead.” According to CJLs, this casual approach is beneficial because it helps put people at ease, making them more likely to share detailed and accurate information about their lives.



The answers people provide during the initial meeting are used for three main purposes:

1. Ensure that people meet the criteria for CJL assistance. Criteria include having a need related to a mental health, substance use, or co-occurring disorder; being 18 or older; being in one of the following stages of the legal process: incarcerated, pre-plea, pre-sentence, or pre-arrest; and evidence that the person would benefit from referral and linkage to behavioral health, and other recovery and supportive services. Occasionally, during these meetings, CJLs discover that the person they are meeting does not meet the criteria. When this happens, CJLs still often try to connect a person to resources that can help them – typically social service-focused resources.
2. Inform service recommendations. While CJLs focus on behavioral health, they also ask about a wide variety of other potential needs that inform the specific services to which a CJL refers a person.
3. Complete applications for housing and treatment facilities, with permission. Gathering comprehensive information at the initial meeting speeds up the process of getting a person connected to services.

### **Stage 3: Connection to Services**

The next step in the CJL process is connecting people to the appropriate services. This includes connecting people to treatment and housing services and to additional services such as transportation. CJLs provide warm handoffs to services whenever possible by contacting service providers on behalf of people, contacting lawyers and judges to inform them of a person's connection to resources, and even helping a person navigate access to insurance or benefits. Because of the strong relationships CJLs develop with service providers, they are often able to facilitate quick connections to services.

People who previously received CJL services repeatedly expressed surprise at how efficient CJLs were in making service connections (see the Connection to Services column of Figure 1). One person described the CJL's work in the following way:



[The CJL] filled out a bunch of applications for me. It was awesome. Within a week, probably I'd say a week, I was in this program. I mean, it didn't take long at all. [The CJL] was really on top of it.

## Stage 4: Follow-Up

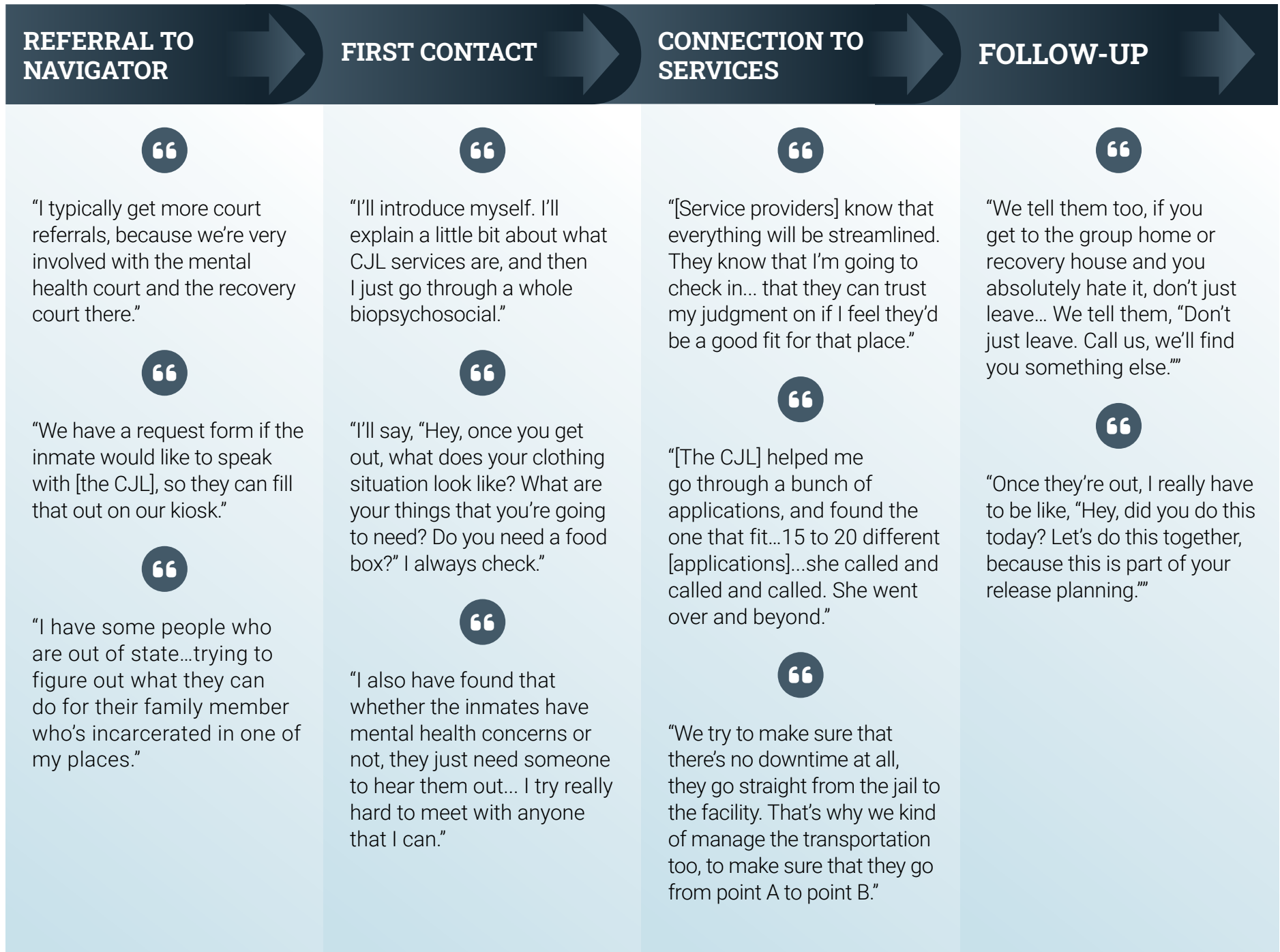
The duration of CJL engagement varies on a case-by-case basis for reasons described in Figure 1. In some instances, for example, CJLs conduct follow-ups with people who have already been connected to a residential placement to assess if readjustment is necessary. CJLs also follow up to ensure that people have met the conditions of their release, preventing any new criminal-legal contact, and to provide reminders about outstanding tasks a person may need to complete such as attending various appointments. Follow-up visits are also used if a client has a particularly complicated need. A CJL describes this scenario:



Once they get released, I will follow back up with them...I've had clients where I will unravel the giant knot of social security with them. So I will sit there and for hours and hours and make calls and try to figure out insurance stuff.

At the same time, CJLs expressed that they aim to connect people to services quickly and they are often successful. Both CJLs and jail personnel reported that it was typical for a CJL to have only one meeting with a person. As a result, it is less common for CJLs to spend more than a week or two with one person. As one CJL put it, "I had one [person] that I was with for 11 months, which is a very, very long time for our program, because we're more about release planning and getting them set up to long-term services."

**FIGURE 5: Quotes Characterizing the Process for Involvement With a CJL: Tennessee**



## BENEFITS

Court staff, jail staff, service providers, and people who had received services all shared examples of CJLs' benefits. CJL benefits fall into three categories: aiding criminal legal system staff, helping people who are involved in the legal system, and bridging the gap between the criminal legal and behavioral health systems.

### **CJLs Aid Criminal Legal System Staff**

Staff in jails, courts, and community-based services emphatically shared how the CJL role helped reduce their workload, in line with one of the program goals, while still allowing them to achieve their desire of connecting people to services. Several expressed that without the CJLs, the work of connecting people to services falls on court staff, attorneys, or jail staff who often do not have the time, network, or freedom within their role to make these connections, even if they want to. One jail personnel summed up the frustration of not having a CJL,



Well, during [the] time we were without [a CJL], a lot of the attorneys had to do a lot of the research on their own for resources. We had to work with what we had, which was very limited, so it was a struggle. It was a struggle.

Another jail personnel echoed that the CJL position takes a lot of extra burden away from correctional officers. Prior to having the CJL, correctional officers were responsible for helping people in jail acquire and mail in applications for treatment providers. With the CJL, people in jail can apply to a wider range of services and the process happens faster and more smoothly. Finally, jail, court, and community-based practitioners all expressed that it is harder for them

to make connections because they do not have the experience and vast networks that the CJLs have. One jail personnel explained,



[The CJL] opens up so many doors to places that we don't normally think of or would [not] ever think of, [or] don't have access to. With county jails ... I am limited as to what I'm able to initiate, [but the CJL] can go straight to the source and give [people in jail] more detailed help and assess their needs best and find out what suits that person best. Things that I am not able to do.

## **CJLs Help People Who Are Involved in the Legal System**

CJLs frequently described their strong desire to help people who are involved in the legal system get connected to services they need with service providers that will be a good fit. One CJL said that, when working with people, she often tells them, “I’m here to help you. I’m a hundred percent on trying to help you and get you help.” Overwhelmingly, the people who had received services could tell how much CJLs wanted to help and felt that the experience of having someone aid them in getting connected to services was incredibly positive. One person shared, “[The CJL] helped me go through a bunch of applications and found the one that fit.” When asked how many applications he reviewed with the CJL he recalled, “15 to 20 different ones, and then the ones that we didn't fill out, she called and called and called. She went over and beyond.” Another person shared surprise at how quickly the CJL was able to connect him to services, “[The CJL] got me in there quickly though. I mean, I see her, and within the next couple of days, she had me in.” He went on to express doubt that he would have been able to get into services that quickly without the help of the CJL, “[Without the CJL], I guess I would have just filled out an application like so many other people in jail and just waited. I think there's a lot of them in there, just waiting, waiting, waiting.” Finally, he reflected on how it felt to work with the CJL and shared, “She treated

me really like a real person, real nice. ... You could tell she was really trying to help me and I really appreciate it.... She's good at what she does.”

## **CJLs Bridge the Gap Between Systems**

There was a strong consensus that CJLs helped fill the gap between the criminal legal and behavioral health systems. Many interviewees felt that people with mental health needs are often released from jail with no plan to get their needs met. CJLs expressed being able to go between the person in jail, service providers, lawyers, and any other relevant parties to get a plan in place. One community-based provider echoed this by sharing,



I think it fills a gap, right? And I'm saying a gap, but I'm really picturing glue that's filling in more spaces than just one linear point-to-point space because [the CJL is] communicating with the people in the courtroom, she's communicating with the jail itself, she's communicating with the family, and she's communicating with whatever the place is that the individuals are going for the service that they need. So ... it speeds up the process of individuals getting out because if it's on the public defender, the public defender's probably got a huge caseload. ... And so John Doe sits in the back for three extra months because the public defender didn't see it as a priority to get to him, whereas [the CJL] does.

Their vast networks and knowledge of a wide range of services help CJLs bridge the gap. One jail personnel shared a time she contacted several facilities looking for housing for someone, with no success. She reached out to the CJL, who knew of a facility the jail personnel had never heard of and accepted the person right away. Several other jail and court staff echoed the value of CJLs networks and knowledge of services. As another jail personnel put it,



[The CJL] pretty much always has a resource. She's able to open doors that we can't even see. So I mean, she's got a whole network behind her that we don't, so she's something. She's very helpful. We really appreciate her honestly.

By bridging the legal and behavioral health system, CJLs prevent people from “falling through the cracks left and right” according to one court personnel. This sentiment was echoed by a service provider who explained that CJLs step in to advocate for people to get into services after they are post-conviction and have lost access to a public defender. The service provider recalled, “[in] one case, the guy was in jail 16 months, but then he was allowed to come to our program, but that wouldn't have happened without another person like [the CJL].”

Finally, several people expressed awe when describing how quickly and efficiently the CJLs could get people connected to services. To demonstrate, one community provider described a recent experience they had after the brought a CJL in to help them with a case,



[The CJL] blew my mind the other day. I mean, I know what she could do and whatnot, but the other day, I've been working with a family that has a son that's trying to get help, and he had to be released from the jail to go to a mental health institute for a few days to get some things straightened out. And then he came back and the family's like, 'He's back now. We'll bond him out if you can find a place for him to go.' And so I called [the CJL] and I said, 'Look, here's the situation. What can we do?' And I mean, I don't think a whole hour went by before she's like, 'All right, I've talked to the sheriff, the judge, the DA, the facility, the person that oversees the facility, and the parents, and this is what we got lined up.' I'm like, 'Wow.'

Others echoed that having the CJL position in place meant that people's needs were being met on a more "consistent and efficient basis." Rather than various jail or court staff doing their best to help people ad hoc, the CJL is a position dedicated to being familiar with the resources in a community and ensuring that people leaving jail are connected to those resources.



# Summary of Findings

## Takeaways

In this section, we describe our key takeaways, organized by topic area, from the site visits and interviews, including program design, needs considered, process, and benefits. We highlight similarities across programs that appeared to contribute to court navigators' success and their positive reception among court, jail, and law enforcement actors (i.e., legal system actors), service providers, and people involved in the legal system.

### Program Design

#### **Court navigator roles are flexible.**

Court navigator roles are intentionally flexible. Navigators shape their daily routines, vary strategies for engaging people in services, and help define their scope of responsibilities. This flexibility allows navigators to be nimble and dynamic in their service delivery; necessary characteristics in the fast-paced, ever-changing, and sometimes volatile legal and behavioral health system contexts. With flexibility, navigators can also be responsive to the interests and expectations of the wide range of legal system actors and service providers with whom they collaborate. Many interviewees expressed that flexibility is critical to program success. However, as discussed later, flexibility requires clear communication about the goals and scope of the role so that legal system actors and service providers understand when and how to refer people to navigators.

#### **Networking is a critical component of court navigators' work.**

Court navigators spend much time building and maintaining networks of legal system actors and community-based service providers. Networks of legal system actors facilitate referrals from these actors and improve the navigator's ability to answer questions about the court process or accurately direct people around courthouses. Strong networks also improve collaboration between navigators and legal actors, which

is necessary for navigators who conduct mental health evaluations or provide treatment updates related to court-ordered conditions. Networks of community-based service providers help navigators efficiently connect people to services. Interviewees across programs highlighted the importance of navigators' networks. Navigators should be given dedicated time for networking both at the start of their roles and throughout their tenure.

## **Needs Considered**

### **Court navigators typically prioritize behavioral health needs and connections to community resources but are also prepared to address other needs.**

Most, though not all, court navigator programs described in this Resource Guide prioritize identifying and addressing behavioral health needs through direct service provision or connection to community resources. In fact, a primary goal of many court navigator programs is to increase access to behavioral health treatment. However, most navigators consider additional needs, such as housing, transportation, and employment, particularly those that may hinder access to behavioral health services. A court actor summarized navigators' role in addressing needs by stating, "Court users ... tend to be people who did not get their needs met in the community. And I see the navigator as an essential answer to that problem"

### **Court navigators help reduce people's anxiety about their court involvement.**

Many people who received services from court navigators described coming to court as a nerve-wracking and stressful experience that caused them to feel scared, anxious, and tense. Across programs, court actors acknowledged these concerns and further shared that courthouse layouts contribute to this anxiety as they can be confusing to navigate. Court navigators try to reduce stress and anxiety by providing clear directions, looking up information about hearings, answering questions about court processes, and sometimes attending hearings to advocate for or support people. One service provider explained that the

navigator role is about, “taking one of the most stressful environments that we have in our society and making it just a little bit kinder, a little bit nicer, a little bit easier to navigate.”

## **Process**

### **Court navigators typically follow a three or four-step process when providing services.**

All court navigators typically follow a three- or four-step process when assisting people: 1) referral, 2) intake or first contact, 3) delivery or connection to services, and 4) follow-up. The process varies by program based on the scope of services and level of involvement. Following these steps helps organize service provision and clarifies the navigators' role for legal system actors and service providers. Navigators also adapt their approach for each person or situation at each step, highlighting the importance of flexibility. For instance, some navigators adjust the length and depth of intake when a person is particularly distressed or intoxicated.

## **Benefits**

### **Court navigators reduce the workload and provide support to court and jail actors.**

Court navigators reduce the workload of legal system actors and provide them with information about the behavioral health system. Many legal actors shared that by answering people's court-related questions and connecting them to community resources; navigators took over work they had been doing, which was often outside the scope of the legal system actors' roles and responsibilities. Legal system actors appreciated being able to refer people to navigators, knowing they would receive the necessary help without legal actors having to overextend themselves. Legal system actors also acknowledge that navigators often had training, experience, and connections in the behavioral health field that they lacked. Legal system actors valued the ability to turn to navigators for additional resources, to discuss behavioral health factors in specific cases, and for assistance in connecting with providers.

## **Court navigators provide information and connections to services.**

People who received services from court navigators valued the information provided and the connections with services. They relied on navigators for answers and guidance around the courthouse, noting that the navigators' support helped prevent them from feeling "completely lost in the system." People also shared that, by connecting them to community services, the navigators offered opportunities they could not have initiated on their own.

## **Court navigators bridge the gap between systems.**

Court navigators bridge the gap between the criminal legal and behavioral health systems for system actors and people involved in the systems. Navigators facilitate communication between legal system actors and service providers, reducing miscommunication due to professional jargon and differing priorities. Familiar with key players across the county, navigators help connect parties that struggle to reach each other. For people involved in the legal system, navigators also bridge the gap by making connections with behavioral health providers, minimizing missed appointments due to difficulty contacting providers, confusion over how to access providers, or barriers such as lack of transportation. This warm handoff helps prevent people from "falling through the cracks," as noted by several system actors.

## **Lessons Learned**

Here we describe some lessons learned that may inform the development and implementation of court navigator programs in other jurisdictions. These lessons reflect the experiences and insights shared by court navigators, court actors, and service providers we interviewed from these five programs. Across programs, interviewees shared two main lessons: 1) the need to clearly define the scope of the court navigator role and 2) the possibilities for increasing the number of navigators within programs.

## Defining the Scope of the Role

Across programs, interviewees highlighted the flexibility of the navigator role as a factor that was key to program success. At the same time, however, that flexibility was identified as a potential challenge. Without a clear description of what the court navigator does, people may not rely on the navigator as intended and may (unintentionally) underutilize services. A defense attorney felt the navigator in their courthouse was underutilized by the wider legal community because "they don't know exactly what [the navigator] does." He went on to explain that more attorneys might refer people to the navigator if they understood the role better. A navigator for another program reported underutilization saying, "I'm not just the housing person, but it seems like that's the only thing that I'm talking to people about." Here, the navigator described feeling that some court actors were only aware of one type of service to which the navigator could refer people. As a result, these court actors only sent people to the navigator to address housing needs when, in fact, the navigators can address many other needs, including a wide range of behavioral health and social service-related needs.

The flexibility of the navigator role also appeared to contribute to some confusion regarding boundaries, or the extent of services, leading to mission creep. Navigators reported occasionally being asked to take on responsibilities that went beyond their intended scope of services, which raised concerns among supervisors. One supervisor noted, for instance:



As the navigators have gotten more ingratiated within the courthouse ... I think they definitely have said that they've been asked to do more things, and I think there have been instances where they felt like it was beyond the scope of their role.

One example of such 'out of scope' requests includes court actors asking navigators to sit with people in the courtroom for extended periods of time before or after their hearing, not to provide services but to manage the person while they wait for their hearing or wait to be transported back to


jail. A prosecutor shared that some court actors “misunderstand what [the court navigator’s] role is and are very quick to have them come in” rather than first determining whether referral to the navigator is appropriate.

To effectively develop a court navigator program, jurisdictions should begin by clearly defining the intended use case for the navigator role. This scope of services should be communicated to attorneys, judges, and other key partners collaborating with the navigators, ensuring a shared understanding of the role’s purpose. Additionally, jurisdictions should allow for flexibility within the role, as many interviewees—particularly navigators—emphasized its importance. As the navigator role evolves, both navigators and their supervisors should regularly reflect on new tasks by asking, “Is this something you feel like you can really handle? Is this within the scope of your practice? Is this within the scope of the job?” This practice of reflexivity will allow for adaptability while ensuring that navigators do not undertake tasks beyond the scope of their role.

## **Increasing the Number of Navigators**

Across programs, interviewees identified the need for more navigators. As demand grows, some navigators reported feeling overwhelmed by “the sheer volume of work.” Speaking on this issue, a magistrate emphasized the importance of “sufficient staffing to make sure that people aren’t in danger of the burnout phenomenon.” Burnout concerns were particularly prominent in programs where there was only one navigator per courthouse. A prosecutor who works closely with a navigator shared, “There’s only a 40-hour week and they’re one person, so I worry sometimes that we put too much on them.” Adding more navigators could alleviate workload concerns and improve service delivery reach. Indeed, navigators who worked in team settings reported that this team approach allowed them to focus on specific aspects of service delivery while relying on each other to reach more people.

Several interviewees also expressed interest in adding more navigators so that they could be stationed around the courthouse. A court actor explained, “One of the things that should be considered, if the resources were available, is adding another court navigator because the facility is so large.” Other interviewees spoke about adding navigators to other courthouses in the county. For instance, one court actor shared, “I wish



we could have [a navigator] on every floor. I wish we could have one over in our child support courts, in our family courts.... I feel like parents go over there and they're overwhelmed.”

By placing navigators in more courthouses or court-adjacent facilities overall and in more locations within courthouses, court navigators may be less likely to experience overly high workloads and, thus, burnout, and programs could have both a wider reach and provide a wider range of services.


## Final Thoughts

Overall, court navigator programs aim to improve people's courthouse experience, connect them to community resources, and reduce their risk of additional legal system involvement. There are a range of models for providing court navigation services. Evidence from our site visits and interviews suggests that navigators have been well-received across programs and models. People view navigators as helpful and feel they have positively impacted both the legal system and the people involved in the system. Interviewees described the navigators as a "fabulous," "incredible," and "absolutely wonderful" resource. Court actors "can't say enough good things about them" while service providers feel they are "glue that's filling in the spaces" across systems.

Based on this project's findings, keys to the success of court navigator programs include allowing for flexibility in navigators' roles, providing time for navigators to develop referral networks, and integrating navigators into the court workflow so they can reduce the workload of court actors and effectively bridge the gap between the legal and behavioral health systems. As with any new program, some lessons have been learned during implementation including the importance of clearly communicating the scope of navigators' roles to legal system actors and the value of implementing more than one navigator to distribute the workload and increase the reach of services within a county.

A formal evaluation of the effectiveness of court navigator programs is a critical next step toward establishing an evidence-based model of court navigation and conclusively stating the success of programs in achieving their goals. However, the value of court navigators to both the legal system and the people involved in the system is not in question. Indeed, interviewees unanimously supported the navigators across programs and recommended that they be implemented in all courts. This was true of interviewees across roles and programs. To demonstrate, one court actor endorsed navigators saying, "I can tell you, if you install a social worker [navigator] outside your [courtroom], they will have a direct marked impact on someone's life ... it's a kinder, gentler approach to the way to have a court system." A service provider





expressed the value of navigators explaining, “If you can catch people and have them have a positive experience with someone in the system ... I think that makes a difference. And for that, I think [the court navigator] is invaluable. ... in an ideal system, every courtroom would have a [court navigator].” Finally, a person who had received services from a navigator shared, “I couldn’t tell you how much I appreciate the work that [the navigator] has [done]. Like I said, she went over and beyond what her job title is. She really did.” This person went on to share that, in his opinion, “every state ought to have [a court navigator program].”

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