



Data Points

Court Navigators: Linking the Legal and Behavioral Health Systems

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Overview

This episode features Isolynn Massey, Brandon Morrissey, and Samantha Zottola, and discusses the process, findings, and future of their publication, *A National Compendium of Court Navigation Programs*. *Data Points* is an ongoing podcast series produced by Policy Research that discusses research for social change.

Brandon Morrissey:

Several interviews we've done have started by mentioning how intimidating their courthouses can be. Security guards, confusing hallways. It's generally a difficult environment for people to navigate, especially when they're unfamiliar with it. Court navigators provide a friendly face that can offer directions, guidance, and even walk people to the right place in the courthouse.

Holley Davis:

That was Brandon Morrissey, a research assistant at Policy Research. In this episode, he and his colleagues, Isolynn Massey and Dr. Samantha Zottola, share findings from their co-authored publication, *A National Compendium of Court Navigation Programs*.

Welcome to Data Points, where we discuss research for social change. Data Points is a production of Policy Research. My name is Holley Davis, and I'm the communications director at Policy Research. In this episode, our guests will share the process, findings, and future of their publication, *A National Compendium of Court Navigation Programs*, which is available for a free download from the Policy Research website. A link to the compendium is provided in the show notes.

Before we get started, let me introduce our guests, Isolynn Massey, Brandon Morrissey, and Samantha Zottola. Isolynn's work centers on project coordination and data analysis cleaning and collection. Brandon assists in program evaluation, data analysis, and results communication. His research primarily focuses on questions related to juvenile justice systems. Sam works on issues related to court and jail practices, bail reform, and the behavioral health outcomes of people involved with the criminal legal system. Isolynn, Sam, and Brandon, welcome. I'm looking forward to hearing more about the Court Navigator Compendium.

Isolynn Massey:

Hi, happy to be here.

Samantha Zottola:

Hey, thanks so much for having us.

Brandon Morrissey:

Hey, great to be here.

Holley Davis:

All right, let's dive in. Sam, can you provide a little bit of background on this publication? What was the associated project, and what were you looking to find?

Samantha Zottola:

We were funded by the State Justice Institute to complete a national scan of court navigator programs. These court navigator programs are starting to pop up across the country, and they are all relatively recent. And they've all been developed locally by partners in the counties and jurisdictions who are seeking to solve problems in their county. So they come together and they create some version of the court navigator role.

And anecdotally, these programs have been really well received. They're well liked in the counties and jurisdictions and states that have them. So now there's some interest in trying to develop national guidance or standards for these court navigator programs. But first we needed to get really just kind of a lay of the land to see where these programs already exist and how they're operating.

So we set out to do a national scan of court navigator programs, and we compiled the programs that we found into a compendium, which is really just like a resource guide, that provide a high level overview of court navigators, just in general, what they do and how they work. And then provide some specific descriptions for each of the programs that we found. And our goal with the document is to serve as a resource for courts that are interested in implementing a court navigator to get some ideas of what that program can look like and how they might implement it in their own jurisdiction or county.

Holley Davis:

Great. Thanks so much for that, Sam. So Brandon, what is a court navigator, and how do they assist individuals navigating the legal system?

Brandon Morrissey:

So a court navigator is broadly a position located in the courthouse that provides all sorts of assistance to people as they move through the court process. As Sam said, they are developed locally, so they look a bit different everywhere. And the court navigator wears a lot of hats. Importantly, these positions are not lawyers. They do not provide legal services, but they can help people get basic information on their case status. Something like what the next step in the legal process is, when a person's next hearing date is, what forms are needed, things like that.

In our work, we particularly focus on the role of court navigators in providing connections to community-based services, specifically behavioral health services. So if someone's looking for help in connecting to a community-based mental health treatment provider, or looking for a referral to a local substance use treatment group, a court navigator can provide that quick handoff. While we were particularly interested in behavioral health services, court navigators help with other issues as well. For example, if someone's in eviction proceedings, a court navigator can provide referral to a housing assistance program.

Holley Davis:

Great. Thanks very much for that, Brandon. It seems like a very highly tailored role to the community in which the folks live. So Isolynn, how do court navigator programs collaborate with court personnel and with other community or legal services?

Isolynn Massey:

Court navigators collaborate with court personnel and other community or legal services in a number of ways. One of these ways is outreach. Specifically court navigators make themselves known to different organizations and it has been an integral part of the success of court navigator services, connecting with organizations and spreading awareness about the court navigator role helps to provide services to the community.

Another way court navigators collaborate with court personnel is through referrals. Court personnel often refer people that need services within the courthouse to court navigators to connect them to services and make appointments, as well as providing updates on people involved with court navigators. An example of this is the collaboration we saw in Tennessee with the medical center to provide resources through referrals.

Another aspect of this is physical navigation of the courthouse. This is a common thing we see court navigators do. And this looks like referring people to a specific person associated with a service needed. A specific example of this we saw in Buncombe County is the court navigator referring people to bilingual services across the courthouse and to specific places so that they know exactly where to go after being directed to fed service.

Holley Davis:

Great. I heard you mention Buncombe County and Tennessee. It sounds like a wide range of programs were highlighted in this compendium. Brandon, how many court navigator programs were featured, and where were they located, and can you share a little bit about how these programs came to be?

Brandon Morrissey:

Definitely. So in our compendium, we focus on 18 different programs from across the United States. Several of the programs we spoke with operate in multiple jurisdictions. The 18 programs operate across 21 states. Three of the programs exist across entire states. So the Tennessee program that Isolynn was just speaking about operates in all 95 counties of the state. We spoke to programs which are located in rural areas as well as programs which work in urban environments. So it's a wide range of places that have these programs.

As to how they develop, while they all have different origin stories, several started off by gathering different community partners in one space to brainstorm solutions for reoccurring problems. So in Massachusetts, the Recovery Support Navigator developed out of a sequential intercept mapping session where representatives from the courts, the Department of Public Health, the Department of Mental Health, and other organizations identified ways that a navigator might be helpful for those people.

Holley Davis:

Thanks so much for that, Brandon. So we've talked a little bit about the differences in size and in service type. Isolynn, could you outline some more of these differences across the programs that you've seen and provide examples on how they vary by either their location or their focus?

Isolynn Massey:

Yes. One of the major things we saw was the intensity of the interactions between the navigator and their clients. We noticed that certain navigators will have short interactions with their clients versus a more case management approach with their clients. For short interactions, some navigators will simply direct to other services or provide a warm handoff to other services, usually within the building. These navigators provide directional assistance, or they can provide more information about resources.

Others will have a more hands-on and case management relationship with clients. This looks like making appointments with them to talk with them about the services they need, connecting them to diversion programs, providing updates to the judge during court visits, and filling out applications on behalf of the client for services. Another difference is the range of people a navigator will connect with. Some navigators will virtually connect with clients in rural areas to increase the volume of interactions.

Holley Davis:

Great. Thanks so much for that Isolynn. Sam, are there any common components across the featured programs?

Samantha Zottola:

Yeah, the programs do vary widely, as Isolynn talked about and Brandon has mentioned as well. And that's because like we've said, each county, jurisdiction, state essentially built the program to be exactly what they needed it to be. But we have noticed a few similarities as well. One similarity is just how much flexibility the navigators have to adjust their workflow to reflect the patterns in the courthouse or to spend more or less time with a particular person to really make sure that they're addressing that person's needs. So a lot of flexibility for the people working in the navigator role across the programs.

Another common component is the amount of networking that navigators do. They really work hard to know everyone in the court, and to know and be familiar with the resources in the community. We've started to do interviews with a couple of court navigator programs, and the navigators that we've talked to have just really emphasized how much time they spend networking. Some of them, when they first started on the jobs, they took the first week or two to kind of just roam around the courthouse and meet as many people as they could, spend time in the community going to different resources and introducing themselves and seeing who's at the front desk, who's making referral decisions.

A lot of the navigators also take a little bit of their work time to sit on committees within the community or within the court, so that they are staying on top of changes that are happening, and so that they really make themselves familiar faces to all of the court personnel, so that other court personnel know who the navigator is and know to refer people to this navigator. So the navigators spend a lot of time doing this networking and really trying to build up a Rolodex of resources within the courthouse and out of the courthouse so that when they make referrals, they are more sure that those connections will be successful. Because they can call ahead and they know who they're speaking to and they can really get someone plugged into resources.

One last similarity is that all the programs are really focused on when a person comes to a navigator, making sure that person's questions get answered without giving legal advice. That is a really important boundary that the navigators don't cross, but they will answer any question that they can up to the point of giving legal advice. And if a person does need legal aid, then the navigators usually know who to refer the person to so that they can get that aid. So there's a real focus on making sure that a person's questions get answered, that they get where they need to be within the courthouse, and that they get successfully connected to any resources or services that they're looking for.

Holley Davis:

It sounds like court navigators really are the connectors for folks encountering the court system. So Brandon, how do court navigators help address the challenges faced by people navigating the court system?

Brandon Morrissey:

Several interviews we've done have started by mentioning how intimidating their courthouses can be. Security guards, confusing hallways. It's generally a difficult environment for people to navigate, especially when they're unfamiliar with it. Court navigators provide a friendly face that can offer directions, guidance, and even walk people to the right place in the courthouse. Now this is just the tip of the iceberg of services that court navigators can provide. Court navigators also take some of the administrative hassle out of the process of setting up contact with these providers. They call the providers, set appointments, and in some case, help clients get to the office of those providers.

Holley Davis:

That's great. Thanks so much, Brandon. So it sounds like court navigators really reduce friction for folks entering the court system. So Sam, on the other side, how do court navigators help courts address specific issues that they're encountering?

Samantha Zottola:

Yeah, there are a couple of ways that court navigators can help courts address problems or issues that they're facing. One is just simple traffic flow within the courthouse. So a lot of navigators will set up desks or tables in the lobby area of a courthouse. So when folks first come through the doors and go through security, they see the navigator sitting right there with a sign that says something like, I'm here to help. And they will go up to the navigator to get directions for where they need to be within the courthouse. Folks in some of the courts that we've talked to have shared that they can tell, at least anecdotally, that traffic flow has reduced in the courthouse after a navigator is put into place.

Another issue that court navigators can help the courts address is making sure that people are aware of resources that the courthouse offers. So sometimes courts are offering really great resources and they don't get used because people don't know about them. So having a navigator in the courthouse is one way to advertise these resources, to make sure that people are getting told about these resources so that they use them. One example is Buncombe County, which is Asheville, North Carolina. They have a court reminder system. And they were having a hard time getting folks to sign up for the court reminders. They were just having a hard time getting knowledge of the system out to people. So their court navigator really works to tell people about this reminder system and will even sign people up for a reminders when he's working with them in the courthouse.

And then one last thing is the navigators can really alleviate some of the workload for other court personnel. So a lot of court personnel are, I think, happy to try to answer questions about the courthouse or try to direct people where they need to go. But this can be hard when those court personnel have their own jobs. Public defenders are very busy, cashiers are very busy. They have a lot of work to do throughout the day, so it can be hard for them to take time to answer general questions about the courthouse or to walk someone where they need to go.

But the navigator is there to specifically do this kind of work. A lot of the court personnel that we've talked to have expressed how helpful it is when someone comes up to them and they feel like they can still be helpful to the person because they can direct them right over to the navigator who can then answer those questions or get them where they need to go, and it alleviates some of the workload that would otherwise fall on them.

Another way court navigators help the courts is by connecting people to behavioral health resources in the community. A lot of courts are starting to really focus on the importance of connecting people to behavioral health resources. There's a lot of recognition that courts are a major source of referral to behavioral health treatment centers and behavioral health resources in the community because a lot of folks who are involved in courts have behavioral health needs. So navigators can serve as a connecting point between the courts and the behavioral health system. And this all can really help courts towards some of the larger goals that they're starting to focus on around serving as a connection point to community resources, and addressing the behavioral health needs of folks that come into the courts.

Holley Davis:

Excellent. It seems that court navigators provide this bi-directional role of support, easing workload for court staff and making the path clearer for folks in the court system. So Isolynn, I understand that you've been on the road visiting some of the programs that were highlighted in the compendium. Can you share a bit about what you've learned on those site visits?

Isolynn Massey:

Yes. We have realized that enthusiasm for the role is important to the success of the navigator client relationship. We have heard this a number of times from navigators we interviewed. A desire to go the extra mile and really [inaudible 00:16:23] needs of clients is what makes the court navigator role so special. We commonly heard appreciation for the court navigator role in being an extensive information hub. This is helpful to court personnel who are focusing on other obligations of the court, like Sam says, or who may not have the extent of knowledge the client may need. Additionally, we've heard that court navigators bridge gaps between services and clients involved in the justice system that organizations have not had the connections to successfully address. An example of this are community organizations who are trying to enroll in diversion services who get resistance from jail staff. Navigators have the networking skills to bridge those gaps.

Holley Davis:

Thank you, Isolynn. Sam, what are the next steps and the goals for this second phase of the project?

Samantha Zottola:

Our next step has been to complete site visits with five of the programs that are listed in our compendium. We're going to spend about one to three days at each of the programs, observing

daily activities of the court navigators, touring the courthouses, and doing interviews. We're doing interviews with the navigators themselves to learn about the role from their perspectives. We're also doing interviews with court personnel and community service providers to learn how they work with the navigators and what they think about the role, and maybe in some cases differences that they've noticed before and after the role was put into place. And just in general their thoughts on the strengths of the role, any potential drawbacks, and ways that they could see the role expanding going forward.

And then we're also doing interviews with people who have gotten services from the navigators to learn from their perspective, what was it like coming into the courthouse in general, and then what was it like coming into the courthouse and having this navigator there to answer questions or provide directions? We're asking folks if they found that to be a helpful experience, and if there are any suggestions that they have for things the navigator could do or not do, or ways that the role could maybe be expanded.

We'll use all the information we're collecting to create some more in-depth resources, really describing court navigator programs, how they work, the day-to-day, how these programs were implemented and put into place. Again, strengths or any potential drawbacks to be aware of, and ideas for how these roles could be expanded and kind of grown going forward. And then ultimately, we really want to start thinking through some recommendations or guidelines that could be put into place to help shape some standards for how this role could or should look when it's implemented by courts. And we hope that those guidelines would be then a helpful resource for courts that want to implement these types of programs going forward.

Holley Davis:

Great. Thank you three so much for joining me today. Before we go, are there any last thoughts that you'd like to share?

Samantha Zottola:

I think I would just say it's been really exciting to see how much variety there is in each of these different court navigator programs. Because they were developed locally by county partners. They really have been each created to meet the specific needs of each county and jurisdiction and state that has one of these navigator programs.

Isolynn Massey:

And I would just like to add that we hope through this work courts can become interested in this role and can find a model that works for them.

Brandon Morrissey:

I'll just add that I think a lot of court programs loses the person in the system. Court navigators are a great example of how human-centered design can be beneficial for both the individuals in the court process and the court system as a whole.

Holley Davis:

Excellent. Brandon, Isolynn, and Sam, thank you so much for sharing your research with me. Court navigation appears to be a model that can provide great clarity for folks in contact with the criminal and civil legal systems. I'm so glad that the compendium is providing visibility and context to this model for other jurisdictions to implement.

This has been an episode of Data Points, a production of Policy Research. Learn more about us by visiting prainc.com. If you have questions or comments about this episode, email us at communications@prainc.com. Data Points is available via Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and SoundCloud. *A National Compendium of Court Navigation Programs* is available on the Policy Research website at prainc.com/resources. A direct link is available in the show notes. This episode was produced and hosted by Holley Davis and engineered and edited by Elianne Paley. Until next time, keep creating positive social change.

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About

Policy Research Associates, Inc. (PRA) is a Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) founded in 1987. We offer four core services: research, technical assistance, training, and policy evaluation. Through our work, we enhance systems that assist individuals with behavioral health needs on their journey to recovery.

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