



**TO:** Hyun Kim, City Manager  
**FROM:** Judge Steven J. Krupa, Judge Sergio C. Flores, Judge Dee A. Sonntag, and Commissioner Jason L. Johnson, Tacoma Municipal Court  
**COPY:** Community Vitality and Safety (CVS) Committee Members, CVS Executive Liaison  
**PRESENTER:** Judge Dee A. Sonntag  
**SUBJECT:** Therapeutic Courts & Support Services: The Therapeutic Approach Model  
**DATE:** April 23, 2026

**PRESENTATION TYPE:**  
 Informational Briefing

**SUMMARY:**

This memorandum provides a summary of the development and implementation of Tacoma Municipal’s Therapeutic Court program since it launched in 2023. The memo and accompanying presentation aim to review the number of clients served by Therapeutic Courts, successes of the program, and frequent barriers encountered. Following a discussion of barriers, Tacoma Municipal Court (TMC) will propose several targeted interventions which aim to expand the effectiveness of therapeutic approaches in the justice system. The court welcomes questions and feedback from the CVS Committee on these proposals.

**BACKGROUND:**

In 2023, TMC launched two Therapeutic Courts:

- Behavioral Health Court (formerly called Mental Health Court): a 12-month program designed for individuals with severe and persistent mental health conditions.
- Community Court: a 3-, 6-, or 9-month program designed for a broad range of individuals who may need assistance with education, employment, housing, minor mental health concerns, substance use disorder, and more.

The goal of both programs is to connect individuals in the criminal-legal system to necessary community resources to meet their individual needs. Upon successful completion of either program, the participant will have their criminal charges dismissed. From 2023-2025, Therapeutic Courts have seen the following numbers:

	Behavioral Health Court	Community Court
Referrals	48	333
Declined Cases	27	173
Entries	16	119
Unsuccessful Terminations	2	5
Graduations	3	73
Still in the program at the end of 2025	11	41

**ISSUE:**

Participants who have entered Therapeutic Courts report positive experiences and outcomes as a result of the program. Participants have made substantial progress in their personal goals via mental health treatment, substance use treatment, employment assistance, and more. Participants have also shared encouraging feedback on Therapeutic Courts, stating that the community resource referrals they received were helpful, the court environment was welcoming, and they felt encouraged to have the clear support of the Judge and Prosecutor.

At the same time, when we look at Therapeutic Courts numbers in the first few years of operation, one of the biggest statistics that stands out is that over 50% of referred cases are declined before ever entering the program. One of the most frequent reasons that referrals are declined is because the client repeatedly fails to appear in court and a warrant is issued. For many of these clients, the instability they face in everyday life makes it challenging to appear in court. They may be facing a lack of housing, limited transportation options, and inconsistent access to communication tools such as phone or email. Each missed hearing increases the likelihood of a warrant, which in turn leads to re-arrest, additional jail stays and further destabilization. In many cases, this pattern of non-appearance and re-incarceration creates repeated psychological trauma on the individual, leading to an exacerbation of behavioral health symptoms and a distrust in the criminal-legal system. Additionally, this unfortunate pattern also creates higher operational and detention costs for the City of Tacoma. In 2025, the city spent over \$780,000 on detention costs for an average of 166 individuals at Nisqually Jail. This does not include the cost of initial bookings at Pierce County Jail or the law enforcement staffing costs associated with serving warrants. When reviewing statistics like these, we have also come to realize that Tacoma Municipal Therapeutic Courts are not effectively reaching the target population they aim to reach due to these significant pretrial barriers.

Due to these barriers, TMC is proposing to create a wider [Therapeutic Approach Model \(TAM\)](#) to better serve all individuals in the criminal-legal system. Under TAM, the court seeks to strengthen and expand Therapeutic Courts, while also expanding therapeutic interventions for those who may not yet be stable enough to enter Behavioral Health Court or Community Court. Proposed interventions fall under three categories:

**1) Expand and Stabilize Therapeutic Courts****a. Increase Therapeutic Court Access**

To enter Tacoma Therapeutic Courts, prospective participants are asked to complete several referral steps before they are eligible for entry. These referral steps are intended to ensure participants are well informed of their court requirements before entering the program; however, these steps can also slow down or complicate the process of entry for those who are struggling with instability. As a result, Tacoma Therapeutic Courts are actively re-evaluating program requirements and referral processes to broaden access to as many potential participants as possible. The court aims to reduce unnecessary barriers to entry, while maintaining necessary evidence-based practices for effective Therapeutic Court operations. The court is working closely with University of Washington Tacoma on a research project to support these efforts.



**b. Certified Peer Specialist**

Certified peer support specialists are individuals with lived experience who offer “mentoring, access to recovery resources, and available support services to those who are experiencing behavioral health challenges.” The availability of peer support specialists in the criminal legal system has been associated with improved treatment engagement/retention, reductions in substance use recurrence, and higher participant satisfaction. Studies also show promising research that peer support is associated with lower recidivism and reductions in new incarceration rates. ([All Rise, 2023](#)). To better support those referred and enrolled in Therapeutic Courts, Tacoma Municipal Court plans to hire (or contract with) a certified peer support specialist. This position would work with general court participants in the early pretrial process to encourage stabilization and treatment engagement as well as working with therapeutic court participants for ongoing mentorship and recovery maintenance.

**c. Therapeutic Court Sustainability**

Therapeutic Court operations have been almost solely funded by state and federal grants since the program launched. Given budget instability at multiple levels of government, there is a concern that Tacoma Therapeutic Courts could lapse entirely if grant funding is eliminated in the coming years. To reduce the risk of Therapeutic Court closure if grant funds are discontinued, TMC is requesting that the city guarantee current staffing positions (2.6 FTEs). Therapeutic Courts will continue to pursue grant funding for all positions and operations as it’s available, but the program will need support from the city if grant funding should end.

**2) Develop Court Support Services Unit**

As outlined above, therapeutic interventions are needed at all levels of the criminal legal system, not just within Therapeutic Courts. The City of Tacoma recently authorized a new position within the court called the Court Support Services Unit Manager. Once hired, this position will create and supervise a Pretrial Services Program and a Post Disposition Support Services Program. These programs (influenced by [best practices](#)) will aim to offer stabilization services and resources to individuals at multiple stages of the legal process:

**a. Pretrial Court Support Services**

- i. Background: Pretrial services promote pretrial success ([CEPP Report](#)). Conditions of release should be individualized and the least restrictive to reasonably assure court appearance and public safety. A success-oriented, care-coordination support model for pretrial services meets individuals where they are and encourages supportive services that promote success and positive behaviors.
- ii. Need: Allowing pretrial court participants to work with a Pretrial Court Support Services Specialist will allow the Court to use the least restrictive conditions needed to promote court appearance and public safety.

**b. Post Disposition Court Support Services**

- i. Background: Instability can happen at any time in the legal process. Individuals who have been found guilty and are under the court’s supervision for post-sentencing requirements often still struggle to meet court conditions due to their life circumstances. Rather than



simply looking at punitive measures for non-compliance, a problem-solving approach is needed to support this population as well.

- ii. Need: The Court Support Services Specialist will monitor conditions of sentence as ordered by the court, and support clients in overcoming barriers to success. Those assigned to Court Support Services supervision, will work with the Court Support Services Specialist to develop an individual plan to obtain treatment, access community resources, and meet court requirements.

c. **Designated Court IT Support Staff**

As the Court Support Services and Therapeutic Court programs grow, designated IT staff are needed to ensure technological operations run smoothly and that TMC can collect and evaluate program data. Two IT positions are needed to fulfill these roles:

- One full-time Computer Support Technician is needed to oversee the operations of court technological equipment and to troubleshoot technical problems that arise. This position serves an important function in making sure that court technology operates as intended and that court hearings operate in a timely manner and in accordance with all mandated court recording requirements.
- One full-time Information Technology Analyst is needed to help the court develop effective data programming and analysis. In a recent consultation from University of Washington Tacoma, the court received recommendations to improve data collection and analysis processes. Dedicated IT expertise is needed to operationalize these recommendations in the years ahead, particularly to measure outcomes and evaluate the effectiveness of Court Support Services and Therapeutic Courts.

### **3) Expand Evidence-Based Court Appearance Support Strategies**

a. **Automated Court Reminders:**

The primary method the court uses to notify individuals of an upcoming hearing is by providing a court order at their last hearing or sending a summons by mail. In an increasingly technological world, paper notifications are often misplaced or forgotten. Recent research shows that automated text reminders are an effective way to remind clients of an upcoming court date, increase their likelihood of appearing, and reduce the issuance of a warrant ([Chohlas-Wood, et al., 2025](#)). Tacoma Municipal Court plans to implement a text reminder program as a low-cost, high impact approach to reduce the frequency of missed court hearings.

b. **Warrant Quash Opportunities:**

Despite best attempts, some clients will continue to miss hearings and warrants will be issued at times. When this happens, it is important that these individuals have an accessible method to return to court on their own volition to quash their warrant rather than risk being arrested by law enforcement due to an outstanding warrant. TMC is reviewing warrant quash processes and seeking to implement low-barrier methods for individuals to resolve a warrant on a walk-in and/or weekly basis.



c. **Increase Re-Entry Support Services:**

It is well-established that individuals who lack stabilization in their basic needs will struggle to follow up with court programs/conditions. Clients need more wrap-around support upon exiting jail to meet these needs and increase chances of court engagement (along with improving their general health and wellbeing). Tacoma is lacking a robust re-entry support system that could otherwise include: direct jail pickup, transportation to resource agencies, insurance enrollment assistance, medication access, treatment connections, housing support, direct financial/resource support, and more. Dedicated housing options where court participants could be directly referred for stabilization would be imperative as part of re-entry support services. While TMC does not currently have the operational capacity to provide these services directly, we hope to work with other city departments or community service agencies to better meet this need in the future.

**ALTERNATIVES:**

Some potential alternatives to the interventions described above, include:

• **Pre-charging diversion:**

It is important to recognize that the court is not required to be involved in all criminal legal interventions. When considering the [Sequential Intercept Model](#), there is precedent for meaningful services to be implemented at intercepts 0-1. Tacoma already does a good job of implementing some services here through community crisis teams and other behavioral health intervention programs (such as the HOPE team).

To expand these services to other legal system partners, Tacoma could consider implementing a pre-charging diversion program coordinated through local law enforcement and the prosecutor's office. A successful local example of this type of program is King County's [Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion \(LEAD\)](#) Program. The program diverts individuals who are engaged in low-level crimes away from the criminal legal system—bypassing prosecution and jail time—and connects them with crisis response services, immediate psychosocial assessment, and long-term wrap-around services including substance use disorder treatment and housing. TMC would wholeheartedly support a pre-charging diversion model in Tacoma; however, this would require buy-in and operational leadership from local law enforcement and the city prosecutor, as their staffing and capacity allows.

• **Doing Nothing:**

When discussing innovative ideas to better support individuals in the criminal legal system, it is important to also consider the alternative risk of doing nothing. Though Therapeutic Courts have shown early promise that they can have a positive impact on those who participate, they are not currently meeting the needs of the individuals who require those services most within our current systems. Without pretrial support services, individuals in the criminal legal system may experience repeat missed court appearances, cyclical warrants and unnecessary and prolonged incarceration for low-level offenses. Those who are then held on pretrial detention are at risk of losing housing, employment, and, in turn, are more likely to plead guilty, simply to seek release or to resolve their cases quickly. Pretrial detention has been associated with higher rates of recidivism, poverty, and racial disparities in the justice system ([APPR, 2024](#)).



For these reasons, TMC does not believe that doing nothing is an acceptable option at this time. The court views the implementation of a therapeutic approach model at all steps in the criminal legal system as an essential function which will promote fairness, cost savings, and public safety to the City of Tacoma.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

<b>Proposed Intervention</b>	<b>Estimated Cost (for 2027-2028 Biennium)</b>
<b>Expand and Stabilize Therapeutic Courts</b>	
Broaden Therapeutic Court Access- Research Partnership with UWT	\$85,000 (currently grant funded)
Peer Support Specialist	\$200,000 (over two years)
Therapeutic Court Staffing Costs (2.6 FTEs in 2027, increase to 3 FTEs in 2028)	\$ 946,578 (currently grant funded)
<b>Develop Court Support Services Unit</b>	
Court Support Services Unit Manager (1 FTE)	\$371,197 (over two years--already funded in TMC budget)
Court Support Services Specialist (1 FTE)	\$290,111 (over two years)
Court Computer Support Technician (1 FTE)	\$234,659 (over two years)
Court Information Technology Analyst (1 FTE)	\$243,576 (over two years)
<b>Evidence-Based Court Appearance Strategies</b>	
Text Messaging System for Court Reminders	\$15,000 annually
Warrant Quash Opportunity Expansion	No Cost
Re-Entry Support Services	TBD

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Tacoma Municipal Court is recommending all services outlined above. At this time, we are providing this informational briefing to solicit questions and feedback from the CVS committee. As we continue to refine these proposals, we intend to submit a more formalized request for funding to the city in the coming months.