



TOOLKIT:

How to Start a Treatment Court Alumni Program



Congratulations on your decision to pursue an alumni program. There is no better way to show continuing support for treatment court participants and the program than creating an alumni group. An active alumni group supports the work of the treatment court team and highlights for participants that recovery is possible. Robust alumni groups can directly support current participants and provide the lived experience and “walked in their shoes” perspective and recovery support. Although the groups vary, depending on the skills of the alumni participating, in general they not only provide needed peer connections but can also offer group activities and structured events. In addition to the benefits for participants, your treatment court team will benefit from an active alumni group by being able to listen to their ideas and hear the valuable insights they can provide to increase the effectiveness of your program.



Recovery does not happen in a courtroom; it happens in communities. I am a firm believer in this. Treatment court was the bridge to a community I had no idea existed.

— **Abby Frutche**y, 2006 adult drug court graduate

Top 5 Reasons to Have an Alumni Group

- 1.** Creates peer relationships among current and former participants.
- 2.** Provides the team with access to the expertise of the alumni's lived experience.
- 3.** Creates opportunities for fellowship, engagement, and/or activities for participants in the program. This allows them to gain insight into their health, wellness, and recovery process.
- 4.** Keeps alumni engaged following commencement, offering connection and extended recovery support.
- 5.** Creates opportunities for alumni to contribute to their community through engagement and service while positively influencing their communities.



Identifying the Need

The most important considerations in the decision to launch an alumni program are the treatment court team's interest and the judge's approval. The team should agree and hold a shared vision of what the alumni group can provide participants. Here are some essential topics to explore as you decide if an alumni group is right for your program:

- Do we have the time and availability in our schedules to commit to this process?
- Can we support the planning and implementation phases of building this alumni group?
- Will we have enough engaged alumni to sustain the program?
- Are there identified alumni who can work closely with the team to create and run the alumni group?
- Identify key alumni who can assist with the planning and implementation phases.
- Are there funds to compensate these alumni for their time and expertise?
- How much time can the alumni commit to assist with kickoff and engagement events?
- A memorandum of understanding (MOU) will be necessary once an official structure is established.



The court helped me save my life, and the alumni group helps me keep it.

— **Michael Mooradian**,
2003 adult drug court graduate



Max Ortiz, The Detroit News:
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Engaging Your Alumni

Step 1: Make a list of treatment court alumni.

To answer some of the questions listed on the previous page, your team should start by reviewing your court's graduate list. Go back as many years as possible. Individuals within three months of commencement should also be included in this list. Once you've collected the names, have someone on your team create a spreadsheet that includes the following for each person listed:

- Legal status: Assess the current legal situation of each graduate. Check the list against probation records to determine the current status.
- Location: List the phone number, email, and physical address in the treatment court database or other official sources.
- When you have collected this information, identify an alumni volunteer to assist with outreach. This is an excellent opportunity to get an alumnus involved in maintaining, updating, and managing the contact list.
- Post notices on social media and create "Calling All Alumni" posters. On the poster, provide a link to the social media post, contact information (phone number and email), and positive messaging to encourage participation.



Even though I was on a trajectory of peer support work, others were not. I believe if we had an alumni group to connect our graduates to and a place where they could give back after their case was gone, some of them would still be with us today.

— **Deena Davis**, 2010 family treatment court graduate



Step 2: Start connecting.

Create an event, such as a lunch, dinner, or barbecue, that will kick off the creation of the alumni program. Ensure that most team members and your planning and implementation alumni will be present. To operate a successful event:

- Once a time and place is set, avoid changing it.
- Send reminders two weeks before the event, one week before the event, and again three days before the event. Send electronic reminders such as emails and texts the day before and the morning of the event.
- Provide childcare or activities to occupy children at the event.
- Provide handouts summarizing the vision, purpose, and benefits of an alumni program.

During the kickoff event, ensure that everything runs smoothly. The purpose of this first event is to gain interest in creating the alumni program. Engage potential alumni participants by considering the following:

- Speakers at the event should be primarily alumni, followed by the judge.
- Briefly introduce the idea and share the significant benefits of being involved in an alumni program.
- Ask the audience what an alumni program could look like and how it could benefit them, current participants, and their communities.

- Ask those in attendance what it would have been like if there had been an alumni program when they went through the program. You can use examples of the work being done by other alumni programs to inspire ideas.
- Conduct a “Perfect World” exercise with those in attendance. Ask everyone to describe what the “perfect alumni group” would look like and note the answers on chart paper. Retain this information, as you will use it later in official alumni group meetings.
- During the round-robin discussion, remind alumni of how valuable their knowledge and experience are to their peers and current participants who will graduate after them. Remind them that sober, fun activities are expected to be a part of the program.
- Set up administrative procedures at the event to capture contact information. Use sign-in sheets to collect attendance and contact information so that you can keep the contact list up to date (do this at every event, meeting, etc.). Plan for growth, and keep this information on a platform that can be updated, shared, stored, and protected so that more than one person has access.
- Inform all attendees that you will be contacting them with a proposed agenda, location, date, and time for the official first meeting. Allow all participants to have a voice in developing the agenda.



I knew that I would have to stay connected with like-minded people to sustain the gain I had received in treatment court.

— Ron Wilson, 2010 adult drug court graduate

Step 3: Gather alumni to organize.

Once you have secured a solid commitment from some alumni, it is time for the alumni to organize and develop their community. Use information gathered at the kickoff meeting to shape the first agenda for this meeting. To ensure strong attendance at the first meeting, and to build momentum, consider the following:

- Set the date, time, and location of the first alumni development meeting that is most convenient for most of those who will attend.
- Have an alumnus lead the agenda and assign another alumnus as scribe and timekeeper.
- Explore some of the following questions:
 - What is our vision for this alumni group? The vision creates a mental image of what you want to achieve over time. It is inspirational and should be sustained over time. Make sure it is easy for alumni, treatment court staff, and partners to remember and use.
 - What internal and external strengths do we (alumni) offer? Examples: Connections to the recovery community and organizations, skills, peer support certifications, understanding, participation in sober sports, arts, etc.
 - What are some internal and external challenges we (alumni) will face?
 - What exactly can the alumni group offer and do in the first year? Second year? Third year?

TIP 1: Remember! This is not a treatment court meeting or staffing. This meeting and process belongs to the alumni; thus, they should be empowered to lead. The role of the treatment court at this point is to provide insights into the court's needs (e.g., for peer recovery support specialists, development of sober activities, etc.). In addition, the treatment court staff can help explore expectations of what can and cannot be done legally and fiscally with current participants.

TIP 2: The alumni group will need several planning meetings to create this community and move it into a state of implementation.



Encouraging me at every small win and accomplishment, they helped me find structure and common ground in the community while I learned to live a life without substances and crime.

— **Carlos Gonzales**, 2001 adult drug court graduate

Step 4: Continue to gather alumni to strategize and plan.

After the first kickoff meeting, the alumni must continue to have a “voice and choice” in creating and implementing this effort. Subsequent planning meetings can focus on collecting further information from alumni participants that helps build their buy-in and self-reflection. For example, at the meetings, prompts can be used to explore:

- What recovery-focused groups or activities found by alumni group members after they graduated would have positively impacted their treatment court experience?
- How would engagement in an organized group be valuable, helpful, and practical for the alumni group members’ recovery path and for current participants?
- How often, where, and for how long should the alumni group meet?

Consider the safety of the participants and the alumni attending. Where is the best location? The best option may be the courthouse or a treatment provider’s facility.

Provide resources to those in this planning process. For example, introducing the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) principles of peer core competencies can be helpful. These competencies can serve as a foundational thought process for creating healthy engagement strategies and boundaries.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/brss-tacs/recovery-support-tools/peers/core-competencies-peer-workers>



Having our alumni connected to our local RCO [recovery community organization] has been helpful. It gives people a safe place to meet and connects them with the recovery community outside of the courtroom.

— **Deena Davis**, 2010 family treatment court graduate



Building the Alumni Group

Once an implementation plan and alumni process are developed, finalize the details with all the parties assisting and ensure that the support will be sustainable. If an MOU is necessary, it should be developed during this final stage. Here are a few steps to consider:

Step 1: Organize decisions based on planning meeting outcomes, and include them in alumni group policies and procedures.

Alumni must create an operations manual that includes the vision and mission of the group, rules, and requirements for leading the group. This manual should also cover training and safety measures for engagement. Alumni need to be part of the preparation and decision-making of the operations manual. However, due to time and financial constraints, a treatment court staff member may need to offer to co-develop the manual.

Step 2: Ensure judicial review of the alumni operations manual and plans.

It is critical that the judge reviews the operations manual and provides consent for the implementation of the group and community process. However, there may also be other county or government officials (e.g., county risk manager) who must sign off on such an effort, due to the use of government funds and facilities, and potential liability.

Step 3: Plan for the first meeting with treatment court participants.

Before engaging in the first meeting with participants, gathering and celebrating the accomplishment of creating the alumni group is essential. Ensure that the judge is present to congratulate and thank the alumni and the team for all their work.

Discuss any final thoughts and concerns, and be prepared for changes if needed.



It took me years to gain the confidence to feel that same level of love from within. I needed it from others for a long time and am grateful they shared it with me.

— **Abby Frutchey**, 2006 adult drug court graduate

Implementation

Going "live" with alumni support can take many forms but most commonly occurs in a group setting. These first sessions allow the alumni to get to know the participants and build a safe conversation and support space. Given this, there are a few essential points to remember as the alumni and participant group launches:

Step 1: Enjoy the familial space of a supportive alumni group.

When the first group meeting happens, the alumni create an agenda that covers the reasons for the group and why they have come together to support the participants. The dynamic of the group should be presented as a self-help process. The alumni can tell their story of treatment court and how it helped them in their recovery journey. The current treatment court participants should introduce themselves and briefly describe their experience so far in the program. This is an opportunity to create a space of trust, support, empowerment, and connection.



It was a safe space to share things that had never been shared before with another person. It was a place for me to finally let go of many demons that I had been carrying all the years through my addiction.

— **Abby Frutche**y, 2006 adult drug court graduate

Step 2: Continue to make it their process.

Encourage the alumni to make changes when necessary. Recovery looks different for each alumnus, and continued growth is essential. Set up opportunities for alumni members to provide feedback and insight into ways to grow the group. One suggestion is to do a quarterly planning meeting for alumni who want to attend. At the planning meeting, the group will brainstorm the events for the next three months and discuss new opportunities that support recovery in the community. This group also might address any needed changes to the operations manual. Be sure to notify the alumni group if discussions of group operations will occur at the meeting. You never know who might want to take on a leadership role. Remember, the more involved members are, the more ownership they have in the group.



They never gave up on me, so I never gave up on myself. The alumni were there for me every week to share their lived experience with us freely.

— **Carlos Gonzales**, 2001 adult drug court graduate

Potential Activities for Your Alumni Group

- **Scavenger hunt**—Have fun while learning about the recovery community. First, identify community businesses or nonprofits that support recovery, and write clues for each. Divide the group into teams and give them the first clue. When a team arrives at the first location, they take a group picture at the location and get the next clue from someone at the agency.
- **Progressive potluck**—Food is a motivator to get anyone to attend an event. Partner with recovery-focused businesses or host the event in members' homes. Identify a place to host appetizers, another for main dishes, and a third for desserts. Then have the alumni members sign up for each category. After dropping off the food at the assigned location, everyone meets at the first place for appetizers. This is a perfect time for fellowship, sharing information, or playing a game. Plan to do something at each location as everyone enjoys the food.
- **Chili cook-off**—This is a fun event; everyone loves chili but has their own recipe. Have members sign up to participate in the cook-off. The chefs bring their chili in a slow cooker and label each dish with a number. Provide slips of paper so everyone can vote on which chili is their favorite. Have a fun prize, like an old thrift store trophy, to give to the winner. This activity can be duplicated in many ways (pies, cakes, cookies, soup, etc.)
- **Recovery events**—Create a monthly calendar of what is happening in the recovery community. This includes recovery-focused businesses, nonprofits, and prosocial events. Knowing what is happening in your community and supporting those events is essential. Talk with your members to learn what they enjoy doing to support their recovery, and plan events around it.



I never knew how to have fun without drugs and alcohol, and the alumni's sober activities showed me how.

— **Ron Wilson**, 2010 adult drug court graduate



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