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## **Lynchburg's Adult Drug Court to expand with help from federal grant**

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**A** federal grant will allow Lynchburg's Adult Drug Court to grow its programs as it seeks to meet an increasing need for its services.

Horizon Behavioral Health — a nonprofit organization that serves areas including Lynchburg and Bedford County with a variety of health-related programs, including substance addiction treatment services — was awarded a \$2 million grant this month from the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance. The grant will allow more individuals struggling with substance use and addiction to be helped through Lynchburg's Adult Drug Court.

This is the first monetary grant ever awarded the ADC since its inception in 2017, drug court workers said.

The ADC is a treatment court that allows individuals who plead guilty to a drug offense to opt for a closely monitored, long-term program of check-ins and therapy to treat their addiction, seeking rehabilitation rather than jail time.

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Based on a model developed in the 1980s, the focus of a drug court is to provide treatment for those in need of help with substance use and aiming to reduce recidivism through initiatives such as stable recovery housing and employment.

“We recognize that just locking up and incarcerating individuals that have a substance use disorder is really not a meaningful or effective way to have long-term change in health and wellness,” said Jennifer Smith Ramey, program manager and co-principal investigator with Horizon Behavioral Health. “The drug court’s concept couples the accountability of the judicial system with treatment and recovery support.”

The Lynchburg ADC launched in 2017 as a pilot program. It proved successful, and since then, about nine individuals have graduated, said Rhonda Turner, a program manager with Horizon.

The drug court operates through a five-stage program, Turner said.

Step one, which typically lasts 60 days, is called “starting line.” Step two, “finding your pace,” lasts about 90 days. Step three is “hitting your stride,” also lasting about 90 days. Step four is called “finishing strong,” lasting about 60 days, and the final stage is “winning at the finish,” also 60 days.

Requirements establish a certain number of consecutive days clients must be sober during each stage in order to move on to next steps.

After individual client assessments are made upon intake, the needs and best treatment plans are identified and tailored to every case. Some may require more intensive treatment programs, such as a rehabilitation or detox facility, or outpatient services multiple times weekly, Turner said. Others may need weekly relapse prevention meetings or support groups.

“The assessment is crucial for every individual that comes into our drug court program. You want to make sure that they are getting the treatment that they need, and we go from there,” Turner said.

If program participants relapse, time behind bars is the last option, Turner and Smith Ramey explained — though that sometimes occurs. Consistent with the rehabilitative, holistic healing focus of the drug court, alternative options such as community service are sought first. Each time a participant progresses in the program stages, the accomplishments are celebrated in open court.

“We celebrate them when they are succeeding and doing those things, but we are also with them through challenging times,” Turner said.

Until now, Lynchburg’s ADC was limited in its capacity because all services relied on pro-bono work and in-kind donations of staff and services from community partners, Smith Ramey and Turner explained. The only full-time, paid position within the ADC was the program coordinator position funded by the Supreme Court of Virginia.

Currently, the program is at its 10-person capacity. With the \$2 million grant, however, capacity is projected to grow by 15 spots every year for the next four years, according to a news release from Horizon. The grant also will support staff training and the hiring of new staff members, including a full-time clinician to provide evidence-based substance use treatment, a case manager and peer recovery specialist.

Additionally, the grant money will support transportation for clients who need it. This is one of the most significant barriers individuals face to getting the treatment they need, Turner said, and one of the most critical needs the drug court now can meet.

“This grant came at a wonderful time for us, because we do see challenges with transportation. We do see challenges with getting individuals into treatment, more intensive treatment. Detox facilities, transitional living houses. This grant will allow us to take some of those barriers out of the way so that individuals can focus on their recovery,” she said.

Turner added the Lynchburg NAACP and League of Women Voters assisted with transportation significantly in previous years by sponsoring transportation gift cards or bus passes.

Growth of the ADC is a desperate need in the region, program workers said.

“We know from the community assessment data from the Virginia Department of Health that we’ve had huge increases in overdose deaths and substance use, and that has only been exacerbated since COVID. When we found this opportunity, we knew it was a great fit for not only Horizon’s mission but for the community’s need most importantly,” Smith Ramey said in a news release about the grant.

Two professors from Liberty University’s School of Behavioral Sciences — Dr. Brian Kelley and Dr. Fred Volk — were involved in the grant application process and will serve as external advisors providing guidance and feedback to Horizon as the program develops and grows.

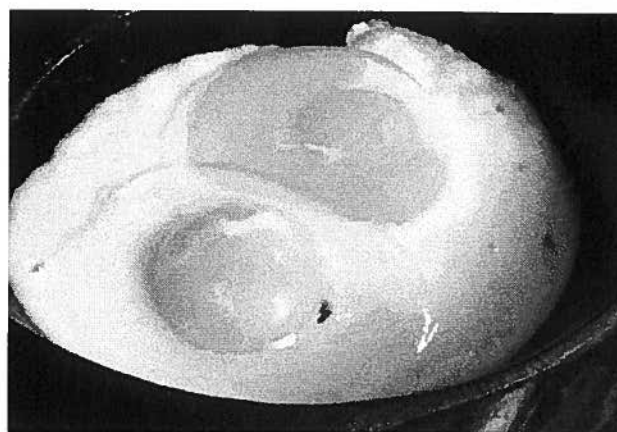
“We wanted to be able to have an external evaluation, have experts in research design and program evaluation, help us to guide our programming and really measure effectiveness,” Smith Ramey said.

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