



# Recovery-oriented practices within the Dartmouth Wellness Court: The Wall of Hope

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Wall of Hope art installation as a product of recovery-oriented practices within the Dartmouth Wellness Court that contributes to a culture and language of hope within the courtroom environment.

**Key Words:** Courtroom; art.

## INTRODUCTION

In response to a growing recognition of the criminalization of mental illness and overrepresentation of people with mental illnesses in prisons and jails, the province of Nova Scotia established its first mental health court program in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, in 2009 (Campbell, Adams, Ennis, & Canales, 2015). The purpose of this court program is to connect court participants, those whose offending behaviour is linked to their mental health concerns, with supportive services and monitoring while going through the criminal justice system (Campbell et al., 2015). In addition to the mental health court program, this court has since expanded to include an Opioid Drug Court Program, an Alcohol Court Program, and a Judicial Monitoring Program, collectively known as the Dartmouth Wellness Court. These court programs are supported by the Nova Scotia Department of Justice and the Nova Scotia Health Authority. The Judiciary, legal professionals, mental health clinicians, and community organizations work together to meet the needs of court participants by applying recovery-oriented principles to target the root causes of crime. There are six dimensions of recovery-oriented principles outlined by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2016): 1) creating a culture and language of hope; 2) recovery is personal; 3) recovery occurs in the context of one's life; 4) responding to the diverse needs of everyone living in Canada; 5) working with First Nations, Inuit and Métis; and 6) recovery is about transforming services and systems. As part of a recovery-oriented approach to court services, the team recognizes the important role they play in an individual's recovery journey and supporting a culture and language of

hope (Allott, Loganathan, & Fulford, 2002). The Wall of Hope has emerged as a product of recovery-oriented practices and a way for past participants to share messages of hope with future participants.

The Wall of Hope art installation is a compilation of artwork created by participants of the court programs including paintings, penwork, poems, rug hook, 3D art, and photographs of varying styles and abilities that are displayed within the courtroom. Accompanying the Wall of Hope is a phrase displayed behind the judge's bench for all to view that says "just because you have a past does not mean you have no future" (Dieleman, Kiepek, Campbell, Abriel, & Williams, 2018). This style of art displayed in the courtroom environment contributes to the transformation of the court services to include "a service culture and language that leads to a person feeling valued, important, welcomed and safe" (MHCC, 2016, p. 15). The idea is that recovery is possible for all, including people involved in the criminal justice system, and that hope stimulates recovery. Within this concept, nurturing hope is the starting point for any recovery-oriented model with the acknowledgement that recovery is fundamentally about hope.

## THE WALL OF HOPE

The Wall of Hope is a visual symbol of a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment within the courtroom in contrast to a traditional courtroom environment. The initial vision for the Wall of Hope was "a space for art to be seen and appreciated ... [we] really wanted it to be something special, that stands out and provides hope. Everyone has gifts and talents, and when they're able and given the liberty to express themselves in the

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way that makes them feel comfortable, that also gives hope” (Dieleman, Kiepek, Campbell, Abriel, & Williams, 2018).

One of the authors, with lived experience as a participant of the program, explained that the Wall of Hope “is for people coming in there like I did, on my first day, and I looked around and I saw all these different paintings, and pictures, and drawings, and things ... And that gave me hope right there. I have to say, the first day I went into the mental health court, I was a mess, I was so scared, I didn’t know what was going [to happen] and within minutes of the judge taking her place in the court, the whole mood of the court started. And to me it was a mood of acceptance, compassion, empathy ... and I believed that this was a place where I was going to succeed from day one” (Dieleman *et al.*, 2018). The Wall of Hope contributes to an environment that fosters hope and encouragement for a difficult time in a person’s life. This same author speaks to how the Wall of Hope and the message behind the judge’s bench, “just because you have a past does not mean you have no future” (Figure 1), decreased the stress and anxiety that he felt when entering the courtroom. In that moment, he recognized that the wellness court team was there to support him in his recovery journey, much more than to deliver a sentence meant to match the harm done by a crime. He states that there was nothing better than to see the phrase behind the judge’s bench on his first day in the courtroom. He says, “I seen that, and I thought—wow. It’s hope. It’s hope!” (Dieleman *et al.*, 2018).

The Wall of Hope is comprised of works of art created by program participants who identified art as a meaningful part of their recovery. Meaningful interactions with the Chief Judge during court sessions would often lead to participants disclosing their enjoyment for and/or creation of artworks. This was seen as an important part of supporting participants’ recovery, and the judge would seize the opportunity to invite participants to contribute their work to the Wall of Hope. For one participant, the external validation that his enjoyment and pursuit of painting is a legitimate part of his recovery made him feel positive, especially because it was “out of the ordinary of something [he] would do, and [he] was quite proud of it and ... absolutely honored to have her ask [him] to display [his art] amongst some very, very fine pieces of work from past participants in the program” (Dieleman *et al.*, 2018). Not only was this person honoured to contribute, but



**FIGURE 1** Dartmouth Wellness Court, Dartmouth Provincial Court, Nova Scotia, Canada

feeling included in a group of people who have completed the program may lead to a greater sense of self-esteem and decrease feelings of isolation.

Each piece of art on the Wall of Hope tells an important story. “There’s a bigger story than just that painting behind it and how it all came to be, but that particular piece is significant of my first baby step into reaching out, crossing a boundary that I am starting to do things that I’ve never done before that I always wanted to do, and moving forward in a way that I never thought I would move forward before” (Dieleman *et al.*, 2018). For some, the contribution of a piece of art represents a turning point in their recovery, while for others it was an opportunity to try something new. These stories and images give hope to future participants in the program, who are stepping into the court for the first time and may be very frightened and anxious. When they see the Wall of Hope, they realize that, “people who have come through this court system and probably entered at a very low point in life, such as I did ... they came through it as well and they came out better [on] the other end” (Dieleman *et al.*, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

As a practice innovation, the Wall of Hope reveals how art can instill hope within a courtroom environment and stimulate recovery. “I needed to see that just to calm me down that little bit and I really, I took a breath and there was something that just told me, I don’t know what’s going to go on in here but I think it’s going to be alright” (Dieleman *et al.*, 2018).

Service providers play a crucial role in influencing and encouraging hope (Allott *et al.*, 2002). Therapeutic courts and other similar environments should explore initiatives like the Wall of Hope for creating a welcoming and safe environment that promotes recovery and nurtures hope based on the art and stories of those who have walked through its doors. When participants can create a physical (and empowering) change to the courtroom, this may serve as a visual reminder to participants and professionals of the value of justice services that align with recovery-oriented principles. As an essential component of positive recovery outcomes, establishing hope within a wellness court environment is key (MHCC, 2016). The Wall of Hope is a visual reminder to all those who walk into the courtroom that recovery is possible and that “just because you have a past does not mean you have no future.”

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

All of the authors are part of a research team engaged in a community-driven project to mark the 10th anniversary of the mental health court program in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Tomi Abriel has the lived experience of being a participant in the Dartmouth Wellness Court and has been a contributor to the Wall of Hope. The Honourable Pamela Williams, Chief Judge of the Nova Scotia Provincial and Family Courts, is the designated judge of the Dartmouth Wellness Court. She initiated the innovative practice within the Dartmouth Wellness Court and continues to encourage program participants to add their own artistic expressions to the Wall of Hope. Dr. Crystal Dieleman, an occupational therapist and Assistant Professor in the School of

Occupational Therapy at Dalhousie University, is the principle investigator of the research project, which is examining four wellness courts across Nova Scotia, including the Dartmouth Wellness Court. Robin Campbell and Stephanie Zubriski are PhD in Health candidates at Dalhousie University working with this research team.

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