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## **Drug Treatment Court battles addiction without jail**

What's the best way for the justice system to deal with a drug addict? Send him to jail, where he'll get minimal treatment and counseling, and almost certainly return to his druggy ways as soon as he's out, and where taxpayers are footing the bill for his room, board and guards? Or put him in a program where he'll get intensive counseling, treatment and be paying his own way?

The answer is clear. And that's the thinking behind the Cobb County Drug Treatment Court, which set up shop last December after being suggested by Superior Court Judge George Kreeger.

The court has the responsibility of supervising drug offenders who, rather than face jail, choose to be placed in an intensive, very closely monitored treatment program. Those in the program face much closer supervision than do those on probation, according to Drug Court Administrator Kristie Gaskin, who with program coordinator Mitzi Walters were the guest speakers at the July 10 Marietta Kiwanis Club meeting. Where someone on probation might only be screened for drugs every month, for example, someone in the Drug Court program can be screened anytime, even several times a week.

The program is not for your hard-core dealers and traffickers, but for users.

Statistics show that 80 percent of those incarcerated nationwide are drug abusers to one degree or another. And the national numbers show that drug addicts who serve prison time are 80 percent more likely to be arrested within five years of their release than those in drug court programs.

Those who take part in the program must be between 17 and 56 and must be either a full-time student or a full-time worker. Only those arrested for a first felony offense are eligible, and the arrest must be for a non-violent offense, such as simple possession of an illegal substance or prescription forgery. Participation in the program is voluntary.

Those ineligible include those charged with trafficking or distribution, those suffering from severe mental illness, an unstable medical condition, those who are illegal aliens, and anyone who has previously been terminated from the program. Failure to remain clean and sober is ground for termination, as is failure to attend and participate in groups, threats or violence against peers or staff, tampering with a drug screen, committing a new offense, an accumulation of program violations or a chronic failure to pay the program's fees. Termination is a last resort, though, and has only taken place once thus far.

Participants are also responsible for a portion, if not the entire cost, of the treatment, which is \$2,400 per person. A sliding scale is used to determine the fee schedule. The program lasts for 18 months.

"That \$2,400 cost of the program per person is a lot cheaper than jail, and it includes the treatment, the counseling, the drug screens, everything," Ms. Gaskin said. "If you're talking about private treatment, you can't get a month for that price. For every \$1 spent on the court, \$10 is saved by the community."

The county also has contracted with WellStar Health Systems to provide all treatment services for the program.

Participants are required to attend counseling sessions four nights a week and on Saturday, as well as up to three meetings a week of Alcohol Anonymous and/or Narcotics Anonymous. They also meet on a weekly basis with one of the Drug Treatment Court's judges, Kreeger and Jim Bodiford. The court administrator for the program is Skip Chesshire. There are 24 participants at present.

The drug screening guidelines are extremely thorough. Those providing a urine sample must drop their pants to their knees and raise their shirt or blouse above the waist to prove they're not hiding anything, for example. And as the program's handbook states in bold letters that can't be missed, "No drug of any kind is to be taken without prior approval from the treatment staff."

The drug of choice of those in the program is marijuana, with amphetamines and heroin close behind, Ms. Gaskin said.

The program recognizes that participants may have a relapse, and punishes such behavior with jail time. But they also are required to come up with their own relapse prevention plan.

The program is broken into five phases of varying lengths, each of which demands lengthening periods of sobriety. By Phase 4, for example, they are expected to have managed a minimum of five months of sobriety.

"We are working with them to change everything about their life," Ms. Gaskin said. "A lot of them wind up without any friends, because their old friends are all users."

So participants often wind up bonding with each other, she said.

So what's the carrot in the program? Aside from the obvious one ☼ 1; not being sent to jail ☼ 1; the benefit for participants is that the charges against them are dismissed. They get a new start in life.

It sounds like a heck of a program, and one that deserves the county's full support.

*Bill Kinney is associate editor of the Marietta Daily Journal. His column also appears on Tuesdays and Saturdays.*



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