

Tuesday, September 7, 2004

## **Cobb Drug Treatment Court to graduate two participants next month**

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MARIETTA - For the first time since its inception nearly two years ago, Cobb County's Drug Treatment Court will graduate two participants in October, a sign, administrators say, that one by one the program is putting wayward lives back on track.

Replacing traditional drug offender punishments such as probation or incarceration, Cobb's Drug Treatment Court is an 18-month program that requires its participants to attend intensive counseling and evaluation, attend outside group meetings, submit to random drug tests and to maintain steady employment and get their high school equivalency, if they don't already have it.

Only first-time, nonviolent offenders are eligible and must be approved by the Cobb District Attorney's Office.

But Cobb's Drug Court, which is one of the 1,078 drug courts in operation in the United States today, is no get-out-of-jail-free card, said Cobb Drug Court Administrator Kristie Garrett.

For example, Cobb's Drug Court was scheduled to have its first graduation in June - seven are expected to graduate by December - but that didn't happen because "participants will not graduate until all requirements are met," Ms. Garrett said.

Currently there are 81 people under Drug Treatment Court supervision in Cobb, 19 below the program cap of 100.

Since the program's establishment, 14 participants have been terminated for court-order violations or high failure predictions. Another 49 have not been admitted due to not meeting the criteria for the program.

Ms. Garrett said the program's 81 participants are held to strict standards that, if violated, can land them back in jail.

As many as five times a week, participants must attend counseling and evaluation with WellStar Health System professionals and outside group meetings, where, if

they are late or do not attend, the sanctions levied can be as extreme as jail time.

Participants also are liable to be randomly drug tested six days a week. Miss an appointment or show up late, according to a handbook given to Drug Court participants, and it counts as a positive - or "dirty" - test, another violation that can land participants behind bars.

Got a bad attitude? That too can warrant community service, extra treatment and assignments or a prolonged stay in the one of the program's phases.

Some of the 49 applicants who were not accepted to the program said jail "would be an easier way out," Ms. Garrett said.

"Drug Treatment Court participants find this program more challenging than jail because they are forced to face their addiction and learn responsible ways of living," she said. "It has been stated many times in the recovery community that getting and staying sober is the most difficult thing that a person can do because it requires someone to change their entire way of thinking, relationships, and environments. Current participants state that not using drugs is actually the easy part of the program. The hard part is being responsible by maintaining a job or school and being on time."

Every Monday, those who have just entered the program must appear before Superior Court Judge George Kreeger.

Asked if he is a tough judge, Kreeger is quick to answer that he is a positive re-enforcer.

"I use positive re-enforcement; some of these folks have never had anyone praise them or encourage them," he said.

Kreeger, who came up with the idea for a Drug Treatment Court after seeing the same people in his courtroom for drug-related offenses again and again, said Drug Treatment Court has been "a good alternative to getting people off of drugs as opposed to (offenders) just coming in and being on probation where they might get one drug test a month and they figure out how to get around that really easy."

"With the intense treatment they get, they probably won't come back," he said.

Instead, Ms. Garrett said, the former drug abusers return to where they did the most damage - their families.

"You see a lot of families repaired 'round the Christmas season," she said. "They say, 'Thank you for assisting in getting my son back; now I have a relationship with my child.'"

Cobb's Drug Treatment Court is by no means a silver bullet.

Last month, out of a total of 374 random drug screens, 19 tests were positive.

When this happens, it can just as hard for those who are trying to help as it is for those who violate the rules, said Mitzi Walters, Cobb's Drug Court Coordinator.

"It's devastating for us," said Ms. Walters, a registered nurse. "But it just shows they weren't ready - I would love to save them all, but some people are not ready."

Ms. Garrett dismisses national criticism that drug courts are soft on crime due, in part, by what she said is given back by the participants.

In 2003, she said, 19 of the program's full-time employed participants at tax time paid in total almost \$35,000 in federal income taxes and \$8,000 in state and local taxes.

Drug Court's are also a tax-dollars money saver, according to the National Drug Court Institution. For every dollar spent on drug court, \$10 is saved on criminal justice costs.

"Basically, a drug court lets an individual who is otherwise going to take away from the community - as they develop through the drug court, they are giving back," Ms. Garrett said.

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