

Officials hail start of new drug court

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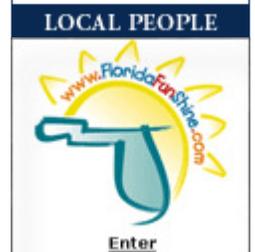
Staff photo by Damien A. Guarnieri Cobb Superior Court Judge George Kreeger tal

By Michelle Graff

Marietta Daily Journal Staff Writer

MARIETTA — It was a who's who of Cobb County at the courthouse Tuesday morning when judges, political officials and the sheriff gathered to announce the official start of Cobb's first drug treatment court.

An alternative to jail time or probation for offenders with no prior felony record, the drug treatment court is a counseling and monitoring program that spans 18 months — 12 of treatment and another six of surveillance.



The program is to be run with the WellStar Health System, which contracts with the county to provide nationally accredited medical services at the Cobb County Adult Detention Center.

Upon completion of the program, successful participants will be absolved of any criminal charges against them.

At a press conference Tuesday, Cobb County Sheriff Bill Hutson said the court is a step in the right direction for Cobb.

Hutson said too many judges operate under the theory that once an offender is sentenced and leaves the courtroom, it is no longer their problem.

"I am pleased to work with judges and prosecutors who agree that it's all our problem," he said. "Expanding jail facilities is a tremendous cost to our taxpayers. We need to look at any alternative forms of jail time to non-violent offenders."

Headed by administrators Kristie Gaskin and Mitzi Walters, members of the court chose the first participant Tuesday morning — a man in his early 20s who had been involved with marijuana since high school. Following the initial selection, court officials plan to select two participants per week.

The participants will be required to attend individual counseling sponsored by the program, attend outside 12-step meetings, hold down a steady job and submit to random drug screens.

And every Monday starting next week, he will appear in front of Judge George Kreeger — who oversees the court — in Courtroom L to discuss his progress.

Speaking at the press conference Monday, Kreeger said treatment will begin immediately.

"That person is going to be the first participant in our program and will be in treatment within 24 hours," he said.

And though Kreeger's name is most often attached to the program as the presiding judge, he said it would not have come about without Chief Superior Court Judge Michael Stoddard, who first brought up the idea.

Also present at the press conference were Cobb Commission Chairman Sam Olens and former chair Bill Byrne, whom Olens credited for first approving funding for the court.

The county commission has approved \$300,000 in funding for drug treatment court over the next two years.

"The past chairman, Bill Byrne, is very supportive of the drug treatment court," he said. "It's a great example of how our court system and our community work together well."

mgraff@mdjonline.com

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