

Misdemeanor Drug Court gears up in Douglas County

Amanda Thomas / Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, March 7, 2014 3:00 pm

As repeat offenders continue costing taxpayers millions of dollars each year, officials in Douglas County is preparing to launch another program designed to hold these criminals more accountable.

The county's DUI court has been operating since April and county officials are preparing to start a Misdemeanor Drug Court. The idea behind accountability courts is to keep people out of jail and get them the treatment they need to help reduce recidivism. State Court Judge W. O'Neal Dettmering Jr. is the department head over the Misdemeanor Drug Court and State Court Judge Eddie Barker is over the DUI Court.

Douglas County has received a \$47,000 state grant to start a Misdemeanor Drug Court and Anita Grainger is the director.

"The DUI Court and the Misdemeanor Drug Court are part of the accountability courts," Grainger said. "Accountability is a big part for the participants. That's why they do have to be either holding a job or pursuing some form of education."

Participants will stay in the program anywhere from 12 to 24 months.

"Even at the end, we will keep track of our participants for five years after they get out of the program to check the recidivism rate," Grainger said. That is a big focus because the idea is to keep recidivism down."

Dettmering wants to make clear that no local taxpayer money is going into the program.

"We got a grant for the first six months," he said. "We expect we'll get a followup grant for 12 months starting in July and that absorbs some of the costs."

The exact cost of the program is uncertain right now, but the fees will include a one-time fee of \$95 for testing and a weekly charge of \$50 for court operational costs.

"Participants are expected to pay and it sounds kind of harsh," Dettmering said. "But in most cases, we found that they were spending more money on the drugs or alcohol."

The program will also be funded by a surcharge that's attached to every drug and DUI fine.

"That when it's collected has to be paid to the county and they have to put it aside in a separate account for us to use for treatment so we've got those three things," Dettmering said. "It won't

cost the county anything. It won't make the taxes go up. It won't be taking from some other programs.”

The goal of Misdemeanor Drug Court is to get people off drugs and back into society. Dettmering stressed the importance of families being involved.

“A lot of them have completely either cut or had the ties cut from their family because of their behavior,” he said. “Some of the goals of a lot of these programs is to reunite these people so they do have that support, get them to a place where they can go to those family members and say, ‘I really quit,’ and they can believe it.”

Bringing an accountability court to Douglas County is something that officials have been considering since 2001 when Dettmering first became a judge. At the time, former Superior Court Judge Donald Howe talked to him and Judge David Emerson about the large number of accused burglars whose actions are fueled by drugs.

“He had a particular person who had come into his court who just kind of touched his heart that was burglarizing businesses, but his problem was the drugs,” Dettmering said.

He admitted that at the time, there weren't many places to put anybody who wanted help. He eventually learned about a new felony drug court program.

“Judge Howe and I went down to one of their conferences and listened to everything they had to say,” Dettmering said. “It seemed to us that at that time, the model they were using was spending a lot of resources (and) a lot of money on very few people.”

Instead of implementing an individualized drug court at that time, the county implemented a substance abuse counseling program called SHARP (Sobriety, Hope and Relapse Prevention).

“That was kind of for the masses,” Dettmering said. “Basically if somebody had a drug problem, we'd send them to SHARP... It was more of an educational program than treatment.”

The program was eventually discontinued, but the accountability courts are seeking to fill that void.

“I've been impressed with the whole concept and I had not been a particularly enthusiastic person about these programs,” Dettmering said. “I just thought it was a lot of resources and not enough people. But I'm convinced that they work.”

Officials hope to start Misdemeanor Drug Court on April 1.