

Panel pushes for drug court (4.10.08)

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Panel pushes for drug court Judges extol benefits of drug treatment court in Brown County

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Green Bay – Drug treatment courts are not soft on crime, but smart on crime according to Judge Scott Woldt, who helped implement a drug court in Winnebago County in 2005.

"When we first started, everyone thought it was easy," he said. "After six months, we had a hard time getting people in the drug court because it was so tough."

Woldt served as a panelist at the April 8 public forum about bringing a drug court to Brown County. The event, sponsored by JOSHUA (Justice Organization Sharing Hope and United for Action), was held at the Fr. Ken DeGroot Community Center at St. Willebrord Parish.

Woldt's presentation focused on how a drug court works. Participants are required to make regular court appearances, submit samples for urine analysis, receive treatment, have a job and do community service. He explained that choosing who to take in the drug court is important in sustaining it.

"We don't take people who have committed violent crimes," he said. "They can kill your drug court. We also don't take drunk drivers. We take felony cases and you must be a five-time offender as a drunk driver for it to be a felony. A five-time offender is too much of a risk for destroying the program."

To date, there have been 54 participants in Winnebago County's drug court. The drug court has six graduates, 29 people currently in different phases of the program and 19 terminations.

"When you compare it to probation, 19 terminations are not bad," said Woldt. "For probation, 50 to 67 percent don't show up for intake. Forty to 90 percent drop out in the first three months. We had a recent graduate who had 188 UAs (urine analysis tests). If you are on probation, you may have five tests. The recidivism rate for our graduates is 0 percent. This works. This is the right thing to do."

Minister Roemon Hamer of Faith Tabernacle in Green Bay grew up in Chicago where he used and sold drugs. He has participated in several treatment programs and did prison time for his addiction. Hamer supports a drug court.

"God was the difference for me in turning my life around," he said, "but I also did a boot camp program in Wisconsin that taught me what it meant to be accountable. I learned about accountability and holding other people accountable. I think this program does that. "I was asked to come here to represent the African American community," he added. "Drugs have no color, no face. Addiction will call anybody. An addict is an addict."

Another component to success is building relationships with the drug court participants, said Woldt. "You see them so often that you get to know them," he said. "I made a point of telling them that I was proud of them. That meant a lot. Most these people have never heard anything nice in their lives. You do change lives in this. As judges there are no greater feelings."

"They got to know us," said panelist Cynthia Running, a graduate of the Winnebago County drug court who shared her story of addiction at the forum. "We were in constant contact with them, three or four times a week. I've been clean for two years because they cared."

Woldt and Judge Barbara Key donate their time to the Winnebago County drug court. Judge Donald Zuidmulder has offered his services in Brown County and is spearheading the formation of a drug treatment court.

"With the kind of support we have, I'm hoping we can get a framework together by mid-July," said Zuidmulder. "A lot of the work has been done. Now it's deciding who to take in the drug court and what are our funding needs? We are putting all the pieces together and hopefully we will be up and running by January or

February of next year.”

“This is not something that simply looks good,” said Brown County Sheriff Dennis Kocken, who participated in the forum. “We are not winning the war against drugs in Brown County. Every year we are adding a drug task officer. Our costs are now more than \$1 million a year in drug task officers. We are just trying to keep up and we’re not. I look at this as a mandate to trying to do something different. Otherwise, we will just keep building bigger jails and locking people up. That isn’t working.”

Woldt also offered financial evidence in favor of the drug court. It costs \$28,622 per year to house someone in prison, while treatment costs per year are \$8,100 per person, he said. In Winnebago County, drug court participants are responsible for paying fees.

“I think I paid off my drug court fees two days before graduation,” said Running. “It was tough, but it was worth it. The greatest gift I got back is my family.”

Fr. Paul Demuth, diocesan vicar for ministers, offered a faith perspective on the drug court at the forum. He praised the toughness of the program in helping people to change as an alternative to the toughness of putting people in jail or prison.

“Our faith tells us that there is a greater power that can break the cycles of addiction, break the bad habits that anybody can get into,” he said. “The establishment of a drug court flows right from the essence of faith. People can change.”

Fifteen of Wisconsin’s 72 counties currently have drug courts. Zuidmulder encouraged supporters to discuss the formation of a drug court with their neighbors, friends, family and colleagues. He also requested support in a different form.

“I am a person of faith, so I am comfortable in asking you to pray for me and pray for the drug court,” he added. “By doing that, you will make a difference.”

For more information on drug courts, visit www.ndci.org.