



Drug Courts saves lives and saves money

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If you need a pick-me-up for your spirits — or your faith in humanity or confidence in the judicial system — go to a Drug Court graduation if you ever get a chance.

It's not your typical day in court.

When do you see judges come around in front of the bench to speak in praise of defendants? When is it OK for the folks in the "pews" to whoop when good news — "He never relapsed" — is announced?

When do you see a judge and a defendant hugging? Or a defendant and a prosecutor?

But there is hugging at Drug Court graduation. And tears. Refreshments and corsages, gifts and politicians and more proud observers than on any other day in Circuit Court.

Because this is a day worth celebrating, for the defendants who have turned their lives around and for the judges, prosecutors, public defenders, probation officers and Drug Court staff. For the 10 men and women who were the center of attention at the Hampton Drug Court's sixth graduation last week, it signified a victory in the battle with the addiction that had landed them in a life of crime.

Because that's how people get to Drug Court. It's a special court, within the Circuit Courts of Hampton and Newport News, that takes jurisdiction over some people charged with nonviolent crimes who are addicts and facing jail time.

They have a choice: jail or Drug Court.

It's not easy time. They have to go for counseling to deal with their addiction and other issues — every day, in the beginning. They have to go to 12-step meetings at least three times a week and pass drug tests that often and go to court once a week. They have to get a job or go to school full time, save money and support their children. They have to make stable living arrangements and steer clear of the friends from their old lives.

This is tough love. Tough, because the demands are strict and the consequences of not meeting them are swift and harsh.

But also love. Participants are helped and guided and encouraged every step of the way by Drug Court counselors and case managers, lawyers and prosecutors and judges.

The affection and respect between the defendants and those who hold them accountable are genuine, if hard won, and laced with humor. One graduate figures that he succeeded only because, "They wouldn't let me fail."

Drug Court defendants are under intensive supervised probation, but they aren't in jail. They're in the community, working, supporting themselves and their families and paying taxes. That's one of the charms of Drug Court: It saves money. Money flows from the defendant into the system instead of just vice versa. They have to pay their fines and court costs (Hampton's 10 newest graduates forked over \$9,357) and restitution and chip in for their treatment. Public Defender John Gochenour figures that the state saved \$190,898 it would have spent to lock up just seven of them.

Circuit Judge Christopher Hutton said what you need to know about Drug Court: "It saves lives and saves money."

Some go fast, and some go slow. Some relapse, and some don't. Some get with the program, and never get off.

The whole time, hanging over their heads, is the threat that if they mess up, it's back to jail. Sometimes it's just to cool their heels long enough to reinspire their commitment to Drug Court. But if they seriously fail to live up to their responsibilities, the full time they faced for the original crime can come due. It was only suspended while they're in the program, and all that's spelled out in the plea agreement that's written when they take the Drug Court option. There's something clarifying about having a piece of paper that says: Do this and this and this, or you will spend 42 months behind bars.

The people who graduated last week had done this and this and this. The most difficult was battling their addictions, which were large factors in their criminal activity in the first place. That's why one of the high points of the ceremony — sure to get a round of applause — is the announcement of how long each has been clean. 706 days, 951 days, 1,551 days, 643 days. Every one of them a challenge, and every one a triumph.

Hence the hugs and corsages.

Hence the reason to go to Drug Court graduation if you have a chance. Because, there but for the grace of God, go every one of us and our sisters and husbands, children and fathers. There, even with the grace of God, go so many.

There is something wonderfully affirming about celebrating with people who have gone from jail-orange jump suits to pinstripes with boutonnieres, who choke up when they talk about how they have reclaimed their lives and children.

Charlie's family summed it up when a relative talked about how he has gone from criminal to "a card-carrying member of the Langley Federal Credit Union." Drug Court, she said, "has helped save his life."

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