

New System Seeking to Break Cycle of Addiction

Family Drug Court Commences: Program Intended to Heal Multiple Generations

By Lisa Broadt lbroadt@chronline.com | Posted: Friday, October 26, 2012 11:44 pm | Updated: 12:02 am, Sat Oct 27, 2012.



Pete Caster / pcaster@chronline.com

Family Drug Court

Family Drug Court attorneys sit in pews as Court Commissioner Tracy Mitchell presides over the new court at the Lewis County Law and Justice Center in Chehalis on Thursday.

The faces and surnames are familiar to 14-year Lewis County court veteran, Commissioner Tracy Mitchell.

But the people facing her bench aren't repeat offenders. Rather, they're second- and third-generation criminals furthering a cycle of addiction, crime, incarceration and pregnancy that Lewis County experts say is all too common.

Family drug court — a program that kicked off on Thursday afternoon — offers a different path for struggling parents.

Building on the systems put in place by the adult drug court, family drug court will treat Lewis County parents who abuse drugs or alcohol and who have had a child removed from their care.

"The true testimonial to the power of addiction is that people can lose their children and still not get clean," said Jennifer Soper-Baker, the drug court manager.

While there's no cure for addiction, it is treatable — and it requires treatment, not just punishment, Soper-Baker said.

An adult participating in Lewis County's family drug court will spend one to one and one-half years in intensive drug and alcohol treatment, parenting classes, and, if needed, psychological counseling. Children will join in the family recovery by participating in the parenting classes, and in some cases, receiving individual therapy.

"It's an intensive program, for sure," Soper-Baker said.

And it's one that's badly needed.

In Washington state in 2005, there were 921 drug-induced deaths, according to Washington Department of State statistical files. In another 8,128 deaths, drugs played a role in multiple causes contributing to death.

Drug-induced deaths afflict Lewis County with particular severity: from 2007 to 2009, Lewis County had the state's 8th worst drug-related death rate, with 19.5 drug-related deaths for every 100 deaths, compared to a statewide rate of 11.39 per 100.

According to Megan Carper, the assistant attorney general that represents the family drug court, approximately 200 children are involved in a court case at any given time in Lewis County. This year alone, there have been more than 70 dependency filings — most of which involved a parent struggling with drug abuse.

Being away from their parents takes a toll on children and may affect their mental health, their performance in school and their decisions in the future, said local social worker Jim Schuttie.

"Kids need their parents. They need their parents to be effective, supportive and protective of them," Schuttie said. "Our goal is to help the kids live better, and if the parents are healthy, they're going to."

Funded by the county's new one tenth of one percent sales tax, family drug court was allotted about \$150,000 for 2013, their first official year.

Though some locals may not be thrilled that their tax dollars are going to absent, drug-addicted parents, those involved with family drug court say the program is extremely cost effective.

Washington state spent an estimated \$429, per resident, on the consequences of substance abuse in 2005. Of each dollar spent, 85 cents was spent on the consequences of substance abuse – mostly health and criminal justice expenses – while 4 cents was spent on treatment and prevention, according to information provided by the family drug court.

Left untreated, cyclical drug addiction will continue to grow more expensive, Soper-Baker said.

"Most drug addicts and alcoholics continue to use drugs and alcohol while they're pregnant," Soper-Baker said. "We stop that. We save millions of dollars per child, because a child exposed to methamphetamine, or heroin, or alcohol in utero tends to have long, permanent disabilities. If you look at the population in jail that falls into that category, it's a huge number."

In its inaugural meeting on Thursday afternoon, family drug court admitted two participants: a mom and a dad who said they hope to conquer their substance abuse problems and become better parents to their child.

"I heard this was a fast track to getting my (child) back," one of the parents said. "Whatever I need to do, that's my priority."

During the 20-minute proceedings, the atmosphere on the fourth floor of the law and justice center was decidedly positive. A dozen treatment providers clapped as the parents — one of whom was in a jumpsuit and handcuffs — signed the contracts that admit them to the program.

“Our goal is to help you change the way you’ve done business in the past,” Mitchell told the new participants. “We’re going to help you be healthy (parents), providing a safe and stable home.”