

Drug Court: How Your \$20 in Sales Tax Was Used This Year

By Lisa Broadt lbroadt@chronline.com | Posted: Friday, October 26, 2012 11:40 pm

Editor's note: A year after Lewis County expanded its sales tax by 0.1 percentage point to fund drug court, *The Chronicle* is taking a look today at how that money is being spent.

A typical Lewis County family — say, one that spends \$20,000 in 2012 — provided \$8.89 to the county drug court, \$3.33 to local transitional housing, \$5.56 to unspecified mental health programs and \$2.22 to a reserve fund set aside for the future of those programs.

Though relatively small sums, drop-your-spare-change donations these are not.

Rather, this money is collected by the county through a one-tenth of one percent sales tax. Instituted in June of 2011, the tax generated about \$900,000 in its first year — money that, local officials say, supports programs which benefit taxpayers in the long run.

Drug Court

The county drug court in 2012 received \$400,000 of the sales tax money.

A judicial program that handles nonviolent, substance-abusing criminals, drug court almost ceased operation in 2010 due to declining revenue. But with the sales tax money, the court has continued to succeed in rehabilitating addicts and preventing future drug-related crime in Lewis County, said Jennifer Soper-Baker, the drug court manager.

According to court records, 78 percent of offenders entering the program were unemployed. Upon completion of the program, that figure dropped to 10.8 percent — all of whom were full-time students. And while most entered drug court without a permanent address, all were released to stable, sober housing.

The program is not free to attendees. According to the court, participants contribute about \$560 for their treatment.

Soper-Baker estimated that, based on national averages, Lewis County taxpayers save \$3.36 in avoided criminal justice costs for every dollar they invest in drug court. That sum rises to \$27 saved when considering other cost offsets, such as savings from reduced use of health care services.

Though she stands by the program's efficacy, Soper-Baker said she empathizes with locals' concerns.

"Taxpayers are the ones paying for drug court. They should know what they're buying," she said. "We're one of the most effective drug courts in the state, and there's no question I won't answer. We try to be as transparent as possible."

Mental and Transitional Housing

Another \$400,000 from the sales tax-generated \$900,000 goes to mental health and chemical dependency services.

Of that, \$150,000 goes, specifically, to transitional housing.

Mindy Greenwood, the chair of the Lewis County Tax Advisory Board, said housing — a basic and essential need — was a logical starting place when designating the mental health money.

“If someone doesn’t have place to lay their head, it’s hard to facilitate change in them,” Greenwood said. The transitional housing is intended for those with a history of mental health and substance abuse problems; nonviolent, repeat offenders who are familiar faces in local emergency rooms and jail cells.

The Lewis County Shelter is one of two housing groups that receive sales tax money. A nonprofit in existence since 1992, the shelter provides a 54-bed emergency housing facility, a 20-bed women and children’s unit and a 14-bed men’s unit. According to the shelter, those staying in their facilities must meet weekly with an emergency case manager.

Magnolia Place, a longer-term transitional housing unit, managed by Reliable Enterprises, also receives sales tax money. The Centralia facility provides eight beds for recently released inmates, each of whom pays about \$425 in rent.

“This housing is for mental health patients who have been a drain on the system and ... Who have a hard time finding a place to live because they’ve been identified as not reliable by the real estate agents in town,” said Lewis County Commissioner Ron Averill. “There are two objectives in this program: one get them housing, two get them case management so they stay on their (medications).”

Brett Mitchell, the executive director of Reliable Enterprises, added that transitional housing is more cost effective than incarceration.

“This group costs the county a lot of money” Mitchell told The Chronicle in August. “This is better than law enforcement picking people up over and over again.”

Two hundred fifty thousand dollars, the balance of the sales tax money designated for mental health and chemical dependency services, is yet to be allocated, said Greenwood, the tax advisory board chair.

This local funding — provided without the strings attached to state and federal funding — stands to make a notable difference in Lewis County, she said.

“Because (patients) have to meet certain diagnostic codes, we can’t use all the dollars we currently have,” said Greenwood, who co-owns Community Allied Behavior Health. Meeting the diagnostic criteria required for state and federal funding is particularly difficult with regard to clients who are just beginning to struggle with mental health issues or chemical dependency, she added.

“But with the one tenth of one percent, we can use the money to intervene at an earlier point to get them help, or (for drug users) provide treatment before abuse develops into addiction,” Greenwood said.

According to the chair, the tax advisory board will discuss allocating the \$250,000 at their November meeting.

Reserve

The remaining \$100,000 of sales tax money will be placed in reserve, said Commissioner Ron Averill.

“We decided that this probably isn’t going to be the last period that we have recession problem,” he said. “Unfortunately, once you start a program there is a recurring cost to it. We felt it was necessary to build up a reserve.”

While the sales tax will continue to generate money annually, those worried that the tax may increase needn’t be concerned: One tenth of one percent is the maximum that a county may tax for therapeutic courts, chemical dependency and mental health services, according to Washington State law.