

Yakima County's mental health court takes new approach on crime

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YAKIMA, Wash. — One recent morning in Yakima County Superior Court, a man in his 30s told the court commissioner how he quit taking his medication, which caused him to fall in with the wrong crowd and commit a felony: He threatened to kill someone.

Even though he failed to comply with a court order requiring him to stay in mental health treatment, the man said he still wants to put his life back together.

“I’d like to go to school,” he told Commissioner Robert Inouye. “I’d like to fix the relationships the best I can with my family.”

Inouye commended the man, who had been jailed for a week, for recently meeting with his mental health team and resuming his medication.

The man, who the Yakima Herald-Republic agreed not to identify, is among a growing number of people in Yakima County who are jailed for committing crimes after they've become mentally unstable.

Many of these offenders cycle through the jail and courts repeatedly because they suffer from mental illness, the underlying cause of their criminal behavior.

Now, Yakima County is taking a new approach toward offenders with mental health issues. A mental health court has been established to place them with a professional mental health team. Those experts are charged with stabilizing the offenders and placing them on a path to a more productive life.

If the offenders comply with the court's terms, their charges are dismissed. The court program aims to address the mental illness of these types of offenders and break their cycle of criminal behavior while keeping them out of jail, which is expensive.

Each Tuesday morning, Inouye presides over mental health court. He decided to give the man in his 30s another chance and arranged for him to get care in an inpatient facility.

"Our goal isn't to throw them out," Inouye said after the hearing. "Our goal is to get them to a point where they have good, stable mental health."

The court began operations in May, and four offenders so far have agreed to participate. There is room for up to 10 in the program at this time. Eventually the court will be expanded to District Court, said Yakima County Court Administrator Robyn Berndt.

"Because it's new, we want to make sure we have a functional court before bringing in more people," Berndt said.

The mental health court program is the latest specialized court created by Yakima County to help prevent people from becoming repeat offenders. Drug court, gang court and a family treatment court are all in that fold. Drug court, which can divert offenders from prison if they comply with treatment requirements, has seen more than 300 people graduate out of 770 since its inception in 2000.

The mental health court is composed of a part-time coordinator and a part-time commissioner and operates on a \$52,557 annual budget from the county. Offenders who agree to participate are assessed a \$150 fee and are assigned to a team from Central Washington Comprehensive Mental Health that establishes a treatment plan and helps them find housing and food. Offenders must be on Medicaid to qualify for the program.

"Most of them are unable to hold a job when they come to us," said court coordinator Gloria Roybal.

“A lot of them are homeless or living with relatives because they are unable to function on their own.”

Offenders can be referred to the program by mental health staff, medical doctors, judges, attorneys, police and even family, and must undergo a mental health evaluation. They are in the program for at least a year, and work with their team to devise a support group and a long-term recovery plan. In addition to meeting regularly with a probation officer and mental health team, participants must submit to random drug and alcohol tests.

Most of the people targeted by the program suffer from schizophrenia, bipolar disorders or chronic depression. Some are considered co-occurring, meaning they have both mental health and drug problems. Both problems are treated simultaneously.

Schizophrenia is a larger problem in the region than most people realize, said Comprehensive Mental Health CEO Rick Weaver. His agency, which serves Kittitas, Klickitat and Yakima counties, sees some 16,000 people a year for schizophrenia alone, and nearly half of them are chronic cases.

“Clearly it’s a very challenging illness,” Weaver said. “Often times people aren’t aware that they are ill and they resist treatment. They are in and out of treatment and wind up down the road and on the streets.”

But the mental health court will help change that, said Jack Maris, senior president of clinical services at Comprehensive Mental Health. He oversees the treatment side of mental health court.

“And that’s the whole idea with mental health court, is that it provides incentives for them to follow treatment,” Maris said. “What court does is it puts some leverage on. So if they’re not complying, and we meet weekly, then they put sanctions on them.”

Sanctions range from community service to jail time. Inouye last Tuesday ordered a woman in the program to serve two days in jail after she relapsed on drugs. “I believe that’s necessary to get your attention,” he told her.

But she’s not kicked out of the program. “I want you to stick with the program and I want you to be successful,” he told her.

Yakima County modeled its mental health court after Spokane County, where the court is only offered in District Court. Over the past six years, the court has saved the county more than \$3 million in jail costs, said Spokane County District Judge Randy Brandt.

Jails are responsible for the medical costs of inmates, including medication, another cost savings for keeping the mentally ill from being incarcerated, Brandt said.

Most important, he said, is seeing people restore their lives.

“It’s one of the most gratifying documents a judge can be on,” he said. “The court gets a lot of letters: ‘Thank you for saving my life. I’m clean and sober, back with my family, and back working again. Thank you.’ They see that the court is trying to help them and not put them in jail.”

In King County, where one of the first mental health courts in the country was established more than 14 years ago, similar results have been produced, said King County District Judge Michael Finkle.

“The people that I see while they’re in court, you can see the improvements in their lives and I can see the improvements in reducing their contact with the criminal justice system,” he said.

Yakima Valley law enforcement officers support the court program, said Yakima Police Capt. Rod Light.

Although many of the offenders are facing felony charges, their criminal history usually begins with minor offenses — stealing just to eat, for example — and eventually escalates into striking someone, sometimes a police officer, because of their mental state, Light said.

“The problem we have when we deal with a mentally ill person is if we book them, that opens a whole new can of worms of whether they can stand trial, their competency,” he said. “A person can sit in jail for months.”

Out of the more than 800 people in the Yakima County jail, about 15 percent of them suffer from mental illness, said Department of Corrections Director Ed Campbell.

A new approach for dealing with offenders who have a mental illness is welcomed, Light added.

“I think the nexus of this is that we can’t keep cycling these people through a court system that doesn’t work for them,” he said. “And they really want help. It’s a program I believe in and a program that I believe can work.”

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Ryan Mundell · Top Commenter · Yakima, Washington

I bet the rate of recidivism goes down SIGNIFICANTLY with this program. I really hope this catches on and spreads. I commend everyone involved!

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Don Padelford · Top Commenter

This is without a doubt the most positive steps a court could take! And the judge has to be a saint to get involved with this. It6 is so easy to condemn people who break the law and just fine them and give them a jail sentence! But it is CARING when the courts not only wants to know the cause of behavior, but also take the right approach to turn around the wrong behavior and make that person better rather ! This is aturn around in the courts system that is nothing but a blessing for the courts, but a blessing for those charged also! The world is gwetting better when things like this are done!

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