

Drug court treats people, not criminal cases

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One way nonviolent drug users in Thurston County can avoid a felony conviction is by completing the county's Drug Court program.

From 2011 to 2013, the court has had 47 enrollees who said heroin was their drug of choice. That's up from 11 enrollees from 2008 to 2010.

The program — one of 23 adult drug courts and 13 juvenile programs in the state — diverts offenders out of the judicial mainstream and gives them a chance to stop using drugs.

They can have their criminal charges dismissed if they keep out of trouble and stay clean. They also must meet therapeutic benchmarks and complete their education or vocational training while enrolled.

It typically takes at least a year to graduate from drug court, said program administrator Ellen Goodman, who has run the program since its inception in May 1998.

According to the National Association of Drug Court professionals, 75 percent of drug court graduates remain arrest-free for at least two years after completing the program.

Offenders with heroin problems do get sober while in drug court, but it's tough, Goodman said.

"The drug is just so gripping," she said.

Heroin abusers have a better chance at success in drug court when they have a recovery network in place, such as family support and a place to live, Goodman added.

Some people might think only a certain type of person can become an opiate or heroin addict, but that's not the case, said Phil Griffith, a defense attorney from Thurston County Drug Court's Office of Assigned Counsel.

"It affects every single class of people," he said. "It affects everybody."

Jennifer West says drug court saved her life.

The 35-year-old Olympia woman graduated in 2000 after abusing heroin for several years. She credits the court's "moral reconnection therapy" with giving her the tools she needed to stay sober.

The therapy is a form of group and individual counseling that emphasizes correcting thought processes that lead to substance abuse by changing an addict's "beliefs, attitudes and behaviors," according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

West said cutting heroin out of her life was no easy feat.

"It was a very long process, it was not an easy thing," said West, who tried heroin off and on for several years before becoming physically dependent on it. "I didn't realize it until it was probably too late to turn back."

West and her friends used to drive to Tacoma to get drugs when she was using in the late 1990s. She said she paid "\$20 apiece" for heroin back then.

Most days were preoccupied with trying to find enough of the drug simply "to feel normal," West said, adding "I got really good at lying."

Heroin took her places she never thought she'd go, including jail and sleeping in a public bathroom at Percival Landing.

Even after getting clean several times during drug court, she relapsed, turning back to the drug and winding up in jail as part of her drug court sanctions.

West called drug court the "safe, supportive" environment she needed to eventually stay off drugs. The court's former presiding judge, now-retired Superior Court Judge Richard Strophy, "didn't treat me like a court case," she said. "He treated me like a person."

West said she hasn't looked back since completing the program, and now has a steady job and a healthy relationship.

"I just don't do it," she said of the drug that once owned her life. "I don't go to bars, I don't hang out with people who use drugs."

What advice would she have for young people who are using heroin now?

West said she'd ask them a simple question.

"Look at yourself in 10 years," she said. "Is that really who you want to be?"

Read more here: <http://www.theolympian.com/2013/11/25/2850080/drug-court-treats-people-not-criminal.html#storylink=cpy>