

Tax-funded Washington mental health courts seeing success

By Kristin M. Kraemer Tri-City Herald

March 3, 2014 - 6:40am

The judicial system can be overwhelming for any person. So imagine having schizophrenia or some other serious mental illness that's gone unchecked, and trying to navigate through the justice system with scheduled hearings and conditions.

Barbara Folden understands it can be difficult and says that's where mental health court can help.

"A lot of these people, they just don't have the ability to get into services, so that's where we help them," said Folden, manager/evaluator for Spokane County District/ Municipal Mental Health Court.

The specialty court — which diverts select people into judicially supervised, community-based treatment — provides a lot of continuity for people with mental illness, especially repeat offenders who can't break the cycle.

Participants work with the same judge, same clinical team, same prosecutor and are in the same courtroom on the same day each week, Folden explained.

It appears to be a successful model. Spokane County is one of 10 counties in Washington operating 11 mental health courts.

King County Regional Mental Health Court and Seattle Mental Health Court were the first in the state in 1999.

Officials in Benton County have considered for years starting up a program, but their efforts have been hampered by a lack of resources. However, they know the long-term benefits, not only for the participants who become stable, healthy and productive members of society, but for public safety and the taxpayers.

"These are folks that are in your community," said Betsy Bosch, manager for the King County regional court. "They need the assistance, and just looking at simply the criminal issues — because this is a criminal court here — isn't going to help the mental health. You need to treat what the problem is."

Sometimes it is a misnomer for the kind of clientele the court has, Folden said. "They could be our neighbors. We are interacting with them every day. They aren't just the homeless people. There are all kinds, all socio-economics," she said.

"It just cuts down on the overall costs if you help them early and get them in to services and get them on the right road. Then you're not going to have to spend money later on on the criminal part of it. It really works."

King County's court was the second in the nation, Bosch said.

Incorporated within the program is a regional veterans court for combat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The overall program capacity is about 200, though the veterans court has a separate court docket with more than 30 participants, Bosch said.

The court is funded by a sales tax through the Mental Illness and Drug Dependency Action Plan. It is a two-year program, which includes supervision by a mental health probation specialist.

Bosch said when screening potential participants, the team looks not only at a person's diagnosis and treatment history, but also willingness to comply and public safety.

The hope is that once screening is done, participants will understand their need for medications and therapy. And though it may not be as intensive as mental health court, they need to stay in recovery, she said.

Spokane County started a mental health court in 2007, expanding a mental health docket that had been around for about a decade.

Folden, who's been there from the beginning, said the bottom line is they needed something to closely monitor people in treatment and therapy. Predominantly, the court deals with bipolar, schizophrenia, major depression, psychotic disorders and any other serious mental illness.

The program cost is covered by a sales tax approved by the voters for mental health services, with the rest of the money going to other agencies and programs.

The court averages 350 to 400 participants at one time, and accepts people who are in the middle of their misdemeanor or gross misdemeanor criminal case, or those who have pleaded guilty and are on probation. Participants meet regularly with the clinical team, which helps set them up with independent treatment providers in Spokane.

They pass through a series of phases over one to two years, and must stay out of trouble and complete requirements, including mentoring, before graduating out of the program.

"A lot of these people just fall through the system, they fall through the cracks, if you will. So we just help get them through provider agencies and give them some boundaries and structures," Folden said. About seven out of 10 graduates do not reoffend, which means they have about a 30 percent recidivism rate, she said. A number of graduates have even returned just to visit the court.

"It's been life-changing for many people. We're a collaborative court so we kind of get everybody from city limits to county limits," Folden said. "The community is behind it because it's working."