

Superior Court programs earn a reprieve

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Benton-Franklin Superior Court officials may have the miracle they hoped for this week after shuffling dollars so that the adult drug court and a child advocate program survive next year.

With Franklin and Benton counties facing budget cuts, the future of both programs was uncertain.

Last week, court officials estimated they would need \$114,000 from Benton County and \$50,000 from Franklin County to continue an adult drug court program so 39 participants could finish.

Benton and Franklin county commissioners this week heard a revised request for about \$22,000 from Benton County and \$8,000 from Franklin County to keep the drug court through 2010.

Nine of the program's participants are from Franklin County and 30 are from Benton County.

Benton County commissioners approved the request 3-0 Thursday to move their full budget forward to a public hearing Nov. 23. Franklin County commissioners tentatively agreed to the plan and will vote on the request with the final budget at a later date.

Benton County commissioners asked department heads last week to cut budgets by 2 percent in order to balance the county's 2010 budget, which was about \$1.6 million in the red.

After bumping up their revenue expectations by about \$500,000 and cutting about \$1.5 million in expenses, the budget was more than \$350,000 in the black by Thursday afternoon.

With the slight surplus, the county de-cided to kick about \$142,000 back to Superior Court to pay for the CASA program, which is used in Benton County but not Franklin County.

The Court Appointed Special Advocate program uses independent volunteers during certain divorce hearings to decide which parent gets majority custody of a child.

"I'm very pleased," said Pat Austin, Superior Court administrator, after hearing that the CASA program will continue next year.

The second program that faced elimination next year was the adult drug court, a 12- to 18-month rehabilitation and education program.

Austin said court officials scraped the program's budget to the bare bones. Normally, adult drug court costs \$217,000 annually. Next year, it will operate on a \$131,000 budget.

To reach that amount, drug court employees agreed to cut their pay -- the defense attorney will receive half of the normal fee, the clerk and Benton County prosecutor will receive one-third of the normal pay and the Franklin County prosecutor will donate time to the program, Austin said.

In addition, the drug court coordinator position will be eliminated, along with all money for travel and training.

The rest of the funding will come from various sources. About \$22,000 is available from a state criminal justice treatment account, Austin said.

Superior Court will use a \$35,000 donation from Circle of Hope, a nonprofit group, and \$26,000 donated by local organizations. Individuals involved in drug court also pay fees, which should total about \$18,000.

Austin said the drug court saves the community and the participants money by lowering recidivism and medical costs. Those in the program work toward increasing their education using their own money.

The cuts, however, mean the program will not accept new participants through 2010.

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