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Mental health court's first client gets on with life

The Snohomish County program aims to divert people from criminal courts, connect them with the resources they need and reinforce good choices for their lives.

By [Diana Hefley](#), Herald Writer

EVERETT -- A year ago she faced being labeled a criminal.

Last week, she walked out of Snohomish County courtroom with a clean record and perhaps more importantly, a better understanding of her mental illnesses and the tools to manage her symptoms.

"I don't have to worry about anything but my future actions," the woman said. "I only hope people coming here are as ready to take hold of the future as I am."

The 29-year-old is the first to graduate from the county's mental health court. She was one of the earliest participants in the program, which [opened last year](#) as a pilot project, mirroring other well-established courts in neighboring counties.

The Herald is not naming any court participants to protect their privacy.

The Snohomish County court was [launched to help find long-term solutions](#) for those living with mental illness and caught up in the criminal justice system.

"It's a good day. It's a good day for the county. It's a good day for the participant, and it's a good day for the community," District Court Judge Tam Bui said of last week's graduation ceremony.

Bui presides over the mental health court. She and a team of people, including a deputy prosecutor and public defender, screen people charged with misdemeanor offenses whose criminal behavior is linked to their mental illnesses.

The team, mainly through the court liaison, Kathryn Henderson, connect participants with services in the community, such as therapists and support groups.

"Clients' experiences with getting services are all over the map," Henderson said. "We help them navigate."

The court team closely monitors each participant's progress. The defendants must agree to give the

court access to their medical records, which typically would be private and not part of the court file. That allows the team to discuss a person's treatment progress. Participants are required to attend court hearings regularly, obtain treatment and consistently take medications if prescribed by their physician.

"The goal is more about therapy rather than concern with punishment," said Van Chu, an attorney with the Snohomish County Public Defender Association.

In many cases, the participant only faces days in jail if convicted. The aim, however, is to get them help in hopes of keeping them out of the criminal justice system, Chu said.

"Not only is it a quality of life issue for the participant, but it's also about saving money by perhaps reversing that revolving door of the system," Bui said.

The jailing of mentally ill offenders arrested on minor offenses has come under scrutiny as the leaders at the Snohomish County jail struggle to provide appropriate health care for [inmates living with mental illness](#).

Talks are under way with various county leaders to look at alternatives to jail, such as the mental health court.

Before last week's graduation, Bui checked in with a few participants during their mandatory court hearing. She and the court team review case files before the hearings.

One woman, there with her elderly parents, tried to explain the long letter she recently wrote the court about why she had failed to follow some of the rules. Bui told the woman she appeared to be blaming others. The judge asked the woman to redo the assignment.

"I want you write another letter to flesh out how to make better choices and take responsibility," Bui said.

The judge spoke with another woman, encouraging her to share more with a therapist to further her recovery. The woman landed in court over trespassing offenses.

The woman, raising her hand, asked the judge about "the voices."

"They are trying to take me today," the woman said.

Bui explained that the voices had no authority to force the woman out of her new home.

"I can stay?" the woman asked.

The judge reassured the woman. They also celebrated that she rode the bus to court on her own.

Snohomish County deputy prosecutor Hal Hupp said it's critical to the court that there are community resources to help people living with mental illnesses.

"This system is only as strong as the infrastructure in Snohomish County" he said.

The court's first graduate said she previously sought help for bipolar disorder, anxiety and post-

traumatic stress disorder. She failed, however, to accept that she would need ongoing treatment.

"I didn't want to believe I was sick," she said.

She wasn't being treated when she shoplifted from Wal-Mart last year. She was charged with third-degree theft. She didn't have any prior criminal convictions and, if convicted, likely faced a day or two in the county jail, or two years of probation.

Instead, she opted into mental health court. She was struck by the court team's message. They told her that they wanted to help her learn how to take care of herself and to take charge of her life, the woman said.

"I knew I needed to turn around in a completely different direction," she said.

The woman now is employed and enrolled in college.

She said she is grateful for the support from the court.

"If you're willing to work with them, they're willing to work with you," she said.

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