

Chelan County launches therapy court to help struggling offenders

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Chelan County District Court Judge Jonathan M. Volyn poses for a portrait at the Chelan County Courthouse last Friday with an interest in alternative prosecution courts and intensive programs that offer dismissal of charges.

[World photo/Loren Benoit](#)

Chelan County District Court judges will soon be able to divert a select few individuals out of the regular judicial system and into a community-monitored and

supported program that will give them an opportunity to get help for untreated problems like mental health issues or substance abuse disorder that have landed them in trouble.

“It’s a way not only to help someone overcome a difficult issue in their life but also avoid a conviction and entry into an often negative repetitive cycle of a criminal justice system,” said Judge Jon Volyn.

Volyn applied for and received a \$162,000 grant from the state Administrative Office of the Courts to establish the Chelan County Community Court to give a group of low-level offenders the help and resources to get better. Plans are to have it up and running this fall.

If it is as successful as other therapeutic court programs across the state, the Community Court will reduce the number of repeat offenders, reduce the workload in the justice system and save taxpayer dollars, according to Volyn.

This program is not for all offenders. Volyn said some offenders don’t want to get help and wouldn’t want to go to the time and trouble to be part of the Community Court process. But for those who want help, this program gives them a fresh opportunity to get their lives back together.

Here’s how it will work. Individuals who are facing charges for lower level crimes can apply to be part of the program. Those applications will be vetted by Robert Sealby’s team at the prosecutor’s office. Those that qualify will get a personal assessment based on their needs from local organizations like the Center for Drug and Alcohol Abuse, Columbia Counseling, Catholic Charities, Community for the Advancement of Family Education and veterans organizations. Those organizations will be paid for their work through the grant.

Volyn anticipates that between 10 and 20 individuals will be selected for the pilot program this fall and all participants will meet with Volyn and case workers every

two weeks for a period of one to two years. Those that successfully complete the program will have the original charges dropped.

Volyn likes the positive nature of the therapeutic court approach. At bi-weekly meetings, Volyn said they will be celebrating successes and debriefing things that go wrong in a supportive environment. Creating a sense of positive community can be a huge help to individuals who have been struggling, Volyn told me.

Volyn said the opportunity to get to know these individuals personally, learn their stories and their struggles as well as their capabilities is something that he is looking forward to and will be quite a change from just sitting on the bench passing judgment.

To be eligible, participants have to waive their right to a speedy trial, essentially plead guilty to their crimes, and agree to abide by the terms of the program. If someone gets kicked out for being non-compliant, Judge Volyn will have the power to swiftly adjudicate their cases, which is a pretty big hammer.

But Volyn is far more focused on using his position to support these individuals and encourage them in getting the help they need. For the individuals that qualify for the assistance, being more of a cheerleader and encourager, he believes, will be far more effective than serving in the role of "executioner or bringer of doom," he told me.

"I understand that part of my job is protecting the community and being a deterrent, but this is district court and these are misdemeanors," said Volyn. "Making a change in one person can make a drastic change for the community," he said.

Volyn acknowledges that the Community Court is going to take a lot of extra time and add to his substantial caseload, but believes the potential to support people in changing their lives is worth the effort.

Once the program is up and running, Volyn anticipates that both district court judges in the county will trade off handling the Community Court program.

Launching the Chelan County Community Court is a positive step for our valley and could make a big difference for the participants and the community as a whole. Punishment has its role but so does helping struggling people get better.