



Grads celebrate - in court

By Krista Ramsey • kramsey@enquirer.com • April 29, 2010

A courtroom is not the typical setting for a graduation.

But Thursday afternoon, 10 new graduates of Hamilton County's mental health court celebrated their commencement.

Diverse in age, economics, education and temperament, the 10 held one thing in common - they had been given a rare chance to receive treatment for their mental illnesses instead of a criminal sentence for brushes with the law.

In place in Hamilton County since 2003, mental health courts are relatively rare. Just 150 exist across the nation, including 33 in Ohio. Northern Kentucky has a regional court that serves Boone, Campbell and Kenton counties.

Thursday's graduation was for those facing misdemeanor charges. Hamilton County also started a felony mental health court in October 2009.

The court's primary goal is to provide intensive treatment for people whose offenses are related to their mental illness. But a secondary goal is to free the criminal justice system of people who are better served elsewhere, freeing up jail space and saving money.

Nationally, 16 percent of all prisoners are mentally ill, three times the rate found in the general population. Many are repeat offenders.

"Jails aren't equipped to deal with people who aren't taking their medication or who are psychotic," said Municipal Court Judge Lisa Allen, who oversees the court with fellow judge Julia Stautberg.

"But if you don't address their root causes, they're going to offend again."

Conversely, only 4 percent of those who complete the misdemeanor court program are convicted again within a year, and only 7 percent have re-offended since the program began seven years ago.

In that time, 215 people have entered the voluntary program, mostly referred by judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys. All have serious mental illnesses but are willing and capable of being helped. Roughly 55 are enrolled at any one time. Nearly 75 percent successfully complete the program.

"After going through the program, I have an apartment, I got custody back of one of my children and my other children are back in my life," says Angela Merritt of Northside, who graduated from the program 18 months ago.

Before being diverted to mental health court, Merritt was addicted to cocaine and alcohol, had untreated mental illness and was homeless for 12 years.

Her criminal record was three pages long.

"I haven't been in trouble for two years and seven months," she says. "Sending me to mental health court was a chance to find a different way

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to live, and I took it. I'm hopeful and I'm grateful."

The court uses a combination of treatment approaches, including residential and intensive outpatient programs, for substance abuse, medication, counseling, and daily corrective-thinking classes that teach participants how to manage their illness, make better decisions and improve their interpersonal skills.

"You have the chance to get the tools you've badly needed," says Jay Halteman of West Chester, who completed the program three years ago. "I found out I was bipolar, and my jaw nearly hit the ground. But I found out there are steps I can take to control it, and it's made a big difference - I'm on an even keel."

Halteman hasn't been back in court to face criminal charges since, although he does occasionally sit in on proceedings to reconnect with his probation officer, Colleen Spencer, who works exclusively with the mental health court.

Spencer is part of a team that includes a psychiatrist, nurse, substance abuse specialist, five case managers and a licensed mental health clinician. They meet with clients three times a week and meet with each other daily to review clients' progress.

"We have the resources to hone in on what lies behind the criminal offense," says Nikki Bisig, director of Assertive Community Services, which provides case management services.

"There's accountability and there's structure. Usually by the time our clients come to us, they've lost everything - their children, housing, money, their family and their freedom. For them, the idea that anyone is there for them is hard to wrap their heads around."

The court is funded through the Hamilton County Mental Health and Recovery Services Board, primarily by the Hamilton County mental health levy.

Who's eligible?

The criteria for taking part in Hamilton County mental health court include:

Having schizophrenia, or bipolar, major depressive or schizoaffective disorder

Facing misdemeanor charges with no history of violence

Hamilton County resident

Agreeing to plead guilty

Having the cognitive ability to participate

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