

Judge: Drug Court a stepping stone to strength

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WARREN - As the graduates from the Trumbull County Common Pleas Drug Court have learned, a part on the route to recovery from addiction is taking responsibility for the legal consequences of their habit.

Six people this month graduated from the 15-year-old treatment-in-lieu-of-conviction program.

"Drug court is proving to be effective to a certain extent," Judge Andrew D. Logan said. "We are doing the best we can with the resources we have."

Logan said there are 100 people active in the program. There is a 15- to 18-person waiting list, people who have had felony drug or drug-related cases bound over to the court from municipal courts in the county.

Individuals must apply for the court and then wait for an assessment to be completed. Logan said those who have committed violent crimes and those involved in the distribution of drugs are automatically disqualified.

The program's success rate has been fairly consistent - 65 to 70 percent of people accepted will graduate from the program, the judge said.

On Tuesday, Logan congratulated the individual efforts of six people who came into the program from all walks of life.

"Thank you for coming in and trusting the system," Logan told the courtroom filled with the graduates, their families, attorneys, counselors and current program participants.

"We know recovery involves relapse. So thank you for using this process as a stepping stone to become better and stronger."

The graduates received a Mocha House gift card, a plaque, a round of applause and the chance to have their records expunged after a year passes.

"You thrived in recovery. You did a great job and we are proud of you," Logan said of David Carioti before attorney Jeff Goodman moved to dismiss the case against him and assistant county prosecutor Stanley Elkins agreed.

Addressing active participants in the program, Carioti said, "Just shut up and listen. They aren't here to hurt you. They came here to help. Life isn't about drinking and drugging."

Carioti's drug possession charge was bound over to the court in November 2013. The minimum amount of time it takes to graduate from drug court is one year, Logan said. Graduation means Carioti has not been convicted of a felony, though he did have to plead guilty to the felony that got him there.

After waiting another year, the former defendant can apply for record expungement.

The court notes that it does tolerate mistakes. Since Carioti's acceptance into the court in March 2014, the judge issued two warrants for his arrest - the most recent slip-up was resolved in October 2014.

"Unfortunately, prisons are punitive; they are not places of recovery," Logan said. "We don't send people to prisons to get clean, we send them there to punish them"

CEO of Warren's First Step Recovery, Cindy Woodford, said addicts need abstinence and change to win themselves back after addiction.

"Incarceration can force abstinence," Woodford said. "But it doesn't usually lead to the types of internal changes that recovery requires."

Not everyone is accepted into the drug court. Devontae Wesson, 22, is an intensive outpatient at First Step. He will have to go through normal court proceedings to resolve an open case against him.

"I am glad the system is becoming more understanding with addiction," Wesson said. "But I am not sure everyone is there yet. An attorney smirked at me as I stood in the courtroom and asked for help."

His application into the drug court was denied, according to Common Pleas Court records.

But Wesson said he is still making the changes in his life that he knows he needs. The support from First Step has been paramount, he said.

"Cindy (Woodford) once saw me standing out by the side of the road as she drove by," Wesson said. "She turned around, drove back and asked me if I was OK, and I was - I was waiting for a bus. But the fact that she asked... I have been one in a million my whole life, until now."

Wesson said he starts school on Aug. 27 to study chemistry. He said he didn't grow up with the lessons of discipline he has learned in his program. But now, Wesson said, he has struggled to change through reflection, a process that he said is hard to face, but well worth it.

Logan said the drug court needs more people to help assess drug court applicants to continue its record of success. Woodford and First Step co-founders Tom Dailey and Dave Kapp said they want to expand their three-month-old facility, perhaps even open a second location.

A group of their patients agree.

The detoxification center selects its staff carefully, they said, listening to the reviews others offer on counselors and other essential personnel.

"It doesn't matter how you get into recovery. Some come court-ordered, kicking and screaming," Woodford said. "But facing the consequences of addiction-driven crimes and coming to terms with the underlying causes will teach people an important lesson - you don't have to live this way."