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KEY POINTS

Camden County's drug court will celebrate its 10th year Friday.

A drug court for Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem counties began in April 2002.

Burlington County's drug court started in September 2004.

Drug courts statewide have handled 5,500 offenders over 10 years.

Nearly three-quarters of participants either successfully completed the program or are active and in good standing.

More than 94 percent of those who graduated have full-time jobs.

The re-arrest rate for graduates is 14 percent, compared with the national rate of 27 percent.

Camco drug court marks 10th year

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CAMDEN

Ten years ago, decision-makers in Camden County's judicial system took a bold step and initiated a pilot program to help fight the stranglehold that drug cases had on the court calendar.

It resulted in the first drug court in New Jersey, established to help nonviolent offenders whose crimes were caused by addiction.

The process gives nonviolent offenders counseling, treatment and monitoring during time they'd otherwise have spent in a cell.

"It's very difficult to change the court culture" to take the steps that outsiders might see as leniency for criminals, said Carol Venditto, statewide drug court manager. "But when you're bottomed out, this works. It's for people who have hit bottom."

Other counties, including Burlington and Gloucester, now are served by drug courts.

Camden County's program, which will mark its 10th anniversary on Friday, has been a big success, Venditto said.

So far, 183 individuals have completed the program. The county's retention rate -- defined as those who complete the program and have not been known to return to drug use -- is 73 percent, the highest in the state.

"I'm convinced it is the most successful program to fight and eliminate drug addiction," said Superior Court Judge William J. Cook, who has been overseeing Camden's drug court for 20 months.

The program sets strict curfews, and it depends heavily on participation in 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

Those who mess up, either by using drugs again or failing to comply with their supervision, go to jail. If they relapse often enough, they go to state prison for the offense that got them into the program initially.

The drug court program is supervised by one judge, rotated into the assignment every four or five years, with the help of a designated county assistant prosecutor and deputy public defender.

There are 282 active participants in Camden County's program.

The state as a whole has been the victim of cheap heroin and an explosion of crack cocaine, Venditto said.

"The need for treatment outstrips the number of available beds," said Venditto.

The fight to beat drug addiction no longer is hidden like it was years ago, Venditto added.

"People today have pride in fighting their addiction, and we think the drug court program is successful because they can beat their dependence and become the person next door," she said.

The state, through the \$28 million designated for Division of Addiction Services, covers salaries of people assigned to supervise the program and its participants and treatment costs.

Very few of the participants have health insurance because of the way drug addiction has taken over their lives, Venditto said.

"You can't hold a job if you can't stay clean," she said.

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