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WHERE TO CALL

Agencies that provide out-patient and counseling service for people with drug addictions include:

Camden County Division of Alcohol & Substance Abuse (Step-up Program) 856-225-5070.

Genesis Counseling Center 856-858-9314.

My Father's House, Inc. 856-742-0900.

Sikora Center for Child Development 856-963-1312.

The MICA Club (Mentally Impaired and Chemically Addicted) 856-662-0955.

Message of Hope 856-435-1023.

Center for Family Services, Inc. 856-428-5688.

SODAT 856-964-5000.

Maryville, Inc. 856-456-0660.

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Camco's drug court hailed as success

Program was first in state

By RENEE WINKLER
Courier-Post Staff

CAMDEN - Ten years ago, decision-makers in Camden County's judicial system took a bold step, initiating a pilot program to help fight the strangle-hold drug cases had on the court calendar.

It was the first drug court in New Jersey, set up specifically to help non-violent offenders whose crimes were caused by addiction.

The process relies on addiction counselors, in- and out-patient treatment centers, and a team of probation officers. It depends heavily on participation in 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, and sets strict curfews.

It has a very strong hammer: Participants who mess up, by drug use or non-compliance with the rigid supervision schedule, go to jail.

If they mess up 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.

Within a year of Camden's pilot program, Essex County set up a similar one and drug courts now have state-wide participation.

Camden County is a big success, said Carol Venditto, statewide drug court manager. "It's very difficult to change the court culture," to take the steps that outsiders might see as leniency for criminals.

"But when you're bottomed out, this works. It's for people who have hit bottom. We expect our offenders to use drugs again occasionally, and we respond quickly," said Venditto.

Superior Court Judge William J. Cook, who has been overseeing Camden's drug court for 20 months, said workers in the program have turned him into a believer.

"I'm convinced it is the most successful program to fight and eliminate drug addiction," he said.

Guidelines for the program limit each probation officer to 50 offenders and Camden's five specialized probation officers are almost at their combined limit with 282 active participants.

Camden County's retention rate, for those who completed the program and have not been known to return to drug use, is 73 percent, the highest in the state. After 10 years, 183 individuals have completed the program.

"The need for treatment outstrips the number of available beds," said Venditto, who said the state thoroughly checks out facilities for long-term and short-term residential programs. "We make sure our providers are certified and trained," she said.

Venditto said the fight to beat drug addiction isn't hidden like it was years ago. "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."

"The involvement of the judges is important but it's the probation officers who are the eyes and the ears of this program, the linchpin. If they know their people well, they can find the right programs," 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 coverage because of the way drug addiction has taken over their lives and their ability to have regular employment, said Venditto.

"When you're first in the program, you can't work. You don't have the time. Most have hefty penalties for their drug offenses and we want them to support their families. We want them to get their driver's licenses back.

"You can't hold a job if you can't stay clean. We'll work around that if employers are willing," she said.

The requirement to meet curfews, attend 12-step meetings and meet with counselors helps addicts get their life under control, Venditto said.

Venditto said 78 percent of those in the program statewide are men and well over half have minor children.

She said New Jersey is the victim of cheap heroin and an explosion of crack cocaine, drugs that are much more prevalent than when Camden's program started. The region is lucky, Venditto said, because it hasn't been hit with the rash of methamphetamine use that has affected most of the rest of the nation.

Over the last 10 years, drug courts throughout the state have included 5,500 offenders. Statistics released by the N.J. Judiciary show almost three-quarters of the participants either successfully completed the program or are active and in good standing.

More than 94 percent of those who graduate have full-time employment, according to the judiciary information, and the re-arrest for graduates is 14 percent. The national re-arrest rate for drug court graduates is 27 percent.

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