FOCUS ON
Gwinnett County Treatment Courts: Enforcing accountability to fight drug abuse and crime

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National statistics estimate that drug courts have reduced recidivism by 75 percent.

Repeat offenders are all too common in court systems throughout the U.S., but Gwinnett County's courts have developed a proactive approach to reduce this number by bringing together public safety and public health professionals to treat the root of the problem.

Priscilla Daniels and her team run six of the eight accountability courts in Gwinnett County, which include adult and juvenile drug, DUI, mental health, and parent courts, along with a newly formed veterans' treatment court. The judges who preside over the courts volunteer their time to make them happen.

"Just as we've seen in other parts of the country, our judges were tired of seeing the same faces in their courtrooms and decided to do something about it," Daniels said. "Drug, alcohol-addicted, and mentally ill clients were put in jail, but once they did their time, they went right back to their old habits. The accountability courts were created to address the problems associated with these repeat offenses."

Over the past 26 years, drug courts have served more than 1.4 million individuals nationally according to the National Association of Drug Court Administrators. They have been shown to significantly improve substance-abuse outcomes, substantially reduce drug abuse and crime, and do so at less expense than any other justice strategy. Drug courts save up to $27 for every $1 invested and reduce recidivism by 75 percent.

Gwinnett's adult drug court started in 2005 with Judge William M. Ray presiding, later succeeded by Judge Tom Davis in 2012. A second court was added, led by Judge Kathryn Schrader, last year. To date, 178 participants have graduated from the program. The County formed a juvenile drug court in 2013 with Judge Robert Waller presiding. So far that program has graduated 12 participants.

Gwinnett also began a DUI court in 2005 that has graduated 373 participants, and a second court was added in 2006. The DUI Court program provides intensive alcohol treatment with judicial oversight to multiple DUI offenders. Chief State Court Judge Pamela South and Judge Carla Brown have both overseen DUI Court in the past, while Judge Iannazzone and Judge Shawn Bratton preside over the two divisions of the court today.

Gwinnett's DUI court graduated 373 participants since its start in 2005.

"Before our clients start the process, we make it clear to them that this may be the most difficult challenge they have ever had to overcome, and some choose to do time instead of go through the program," Daniels said. "But those who are successful see it as a way out of the cycle and go on to lead better lives."

In 2013, a mental health court was formed, led by Judge Karen E. Beyers. To date, four participants have graduated. Mental health treatment providers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and community advocates work together to provide treatment rather than punishment. It targets offenders whose crime would not have occurred had it not been for their mental illness. In addition, mental health court links participants to counseling and treatment services as well as needed social services like Social Security, housing, substance abuse treatment, and employment.

Gwinnett also has a parent accountability court, led by Judge Kathryn Schrader and director Kristen Howard, along with the Georgia Division of Child Support Services. Its goal is to educate and equip participants to be better providers, putting their children first, building better families, and preventing recidivism. Collaboration between the judiciary, the business community, nonprofits, and the faith community has demonstrated success statewide in reducing outstanding child support obligations, improving family dynamics, saving the

state incarceration costs, and reducing the need for public assistance and public medical care. Five participants have graduated since this court was set up last year.

The newest such program is a veterans' treatment court that began in January with Judge Karen Beyers presiding. It links participants to VA benefits and provides substance abuse and mental health treatment to U.S. military veterans who have committed felony crimes due to mental illness or drug/alcohol addiction.

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