



PRESS RELEASE

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Adams County Drug Court: Highway to Health

Adams County, Colo. –Following the model of a “problem-solving court,” the Adams County Drug Court team uses a common-sense approach to compel drug-using offenders to change their lives by a combination of judicial monitoring and effective treatment. The Problem Solving Court (PSC) team includes a district attorney, a public defender, a judge, a coordinator, probation officers, counselors and law enforcement personnel. They receive comprehensive training from the National Association of Drug Court Professionals and affectionately refer to Adams County Drug Court as ACDC with the tagline, “Highway to Health.”

Since the Drug Court’s inception in 2011, they’ve graduated 19 high-risk and high-need individuals. The program has helped 183 participants reduce the number of days they would have spent in jail from a pool of approximately 400 people referred to the program. Drug Court has saved over \$2 million in costs that would have been spent housing offenders in Adams County Detention Facility, Community Corrections Division and Colorado Department of Corrections. Costs to detain an inmate include housing, food, clothing, bus passes, food bags, GED costs and eye glasses. These cost savings are a conservative estimate and they don’t include medical and pregnancy expenses while in custody or services for those in the child welfare system.

“The team at Adams County Drug Court is doing great. We’re proud to be part of this successful program to help people overcome their drug addictions and stay out of jail,” said Adams County Sheriff Michael McIntosh.

The data reflects the inception of Drug Court from October 1, 2011 and covers up to August 31, 2015. The Adams County Justice Center has provided additional estimates of cost savings from September 1, 2015 to September 30, 2016. Costs incurred from the Drug Court are much less than housing an inmate in a detention facility. Drug Court costs include intensive outpatient sessions, urine analysis tests, inpatient treatment, sober living, mental health/domestic violence evaluations, intake treatment and electronic home monitors.

In the first 4 years that Drug Court has operated, probation officers screened 354 people arrested for drug use. Those who qualified as high-risk and high-need included 174 people. There were 37 people who were eligible for the program but were denied due to lack of capacity. Others were eligible but declined the program because it was too difficult for them. Those who were eligible for the program but left without an explanation have warrants out for their arrest.

Carrots, Sticks and No Excuses

Drug Court follows a probation revocation model, where defendants have their probation taken away for not obeying the law—then they go back to jail for all or part of their original sentence. Program participants are required to stay clean, or off drugs, for a cumulative 450 days during five phases of the program. They must take three random urine analysis (UA) tests within 7 days and meet with a probation officer and counselor twice per week. Phase one requires 30 clean days. Phase two requires 60 clean days, with each phase resetting the amount of clean days required. Phase three includes 90 clean days, Phase four includes 90 clean days and Phase five includes 180 clean days.

If their UA isn't clean, participants start over calculating sober days. The Drug Court team uses a system of sticks and carrots to reinforce staying in the program. County Court Judge Leroy Kirby has \$5 gift certificates that he gives to those who stay compliant every 2 weeks. Sanctions include writing papers, doing community service and serving short periods of time in jail. The Drug Court team encourages participants to admit drug use and follow values of honesty, accountability and no excuses.

"If Drug Court wasn't here; there would be a lot of addicts in jail or prison not getting help. They potentially would get released back into the community before having the treatment they need to be successful. If they do not gain the tools to work on their recovery, they may go right back to their old behaviors—it's what they're comfortable doing," said Drug Court Probation Officer Carissa Gonzales.

George Wittner recently graduated from Adams County Drug Court. By the time probation officers referred him to Drug Court, he had committed 49 crimes in Adams County while using drugs. He was homeless and divorced. Wittner asked to go back to jail because he couldn't cope with methamphetamine addiction on his own.

"Everything in my whole life has been about drug use—everything. I've never been in any other trouble in my life but for that and what's going on behind it. It's just crazy," 57-year-old Wittner said.

Wittner still kept in contact with his grown children. After he was caught smoking marijuana around his 2-year-old grandchild, Wittner decided to enroll in Drug Court to continue unsupervised visitation with his grandchild. Currently he has gone 509 days without using drugs.

"The absolute best part is seeing someone who was facing jail, walk out of court with a job, substance-free and as a contributing member of the community. As the DA we don't see a lot of the success stories from probation happening because by nature those are not the cases that are coming back to court. It's extremely rewarding to track the transformation of Drug Court participants and learn how they accomplished their goals," said Deputy District Attorney Lindsay Tanis.

Growing Demand for Services in Adams County

The Drug Court had capacity of 30 participants at a time and 19 have graduated. Kirby says the program will soon include 60 participants. As Drug Court grows to accommodate the high-risk population of drug users, there is a parallel need to serve homeless people. Adams County lacks adequate shelter for homeless people, especially for those who have not yet overcome drug or alcohol dependency. While acknowledging this need in the community, the Drug Court team is committed to using an evidence-based system that empowers participants to overcome personal trauma and drug addiction.

“This is the best thing I will ever do in my life as a professional. It’s more work. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done. When I get done with this docket I’m exhausted—it’s a genuine interaction. Our focus is on this person’s success,” said Judge Kirby.

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