



# Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

## News

Administrative Office  
1900 Kanawha Blvd., East  
Bldg. 1, Room E-316  
Charleston, West Virginia 25305  
(304) 340-2305 Jennifer Bundy  
(304) 340-2306 April Harless  
(304) 558-4219 / TTY  
(304) 558-1212 / FAX  
Web Site: [www.courtsvw.gov](http://www.courtsvw.gov)  
Twitter: [WVCourts](https://twitter.com/WVCourts)  
Flickr: [www.flickr.com/photos/courtsvw/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/courtsvw/)  
Email: [Jennifer.Bundy@courtsvw.gov](mailto:Jennifer.Bundy@courtsvw.gov)  
Email: [April.Harless@courtsvw.gov](mailto:April.Harless@courtsvw.gov)

### **Drug Court graduates say program saved their lives**

For immediate release

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. – Graduates who spoke Tuesday at an event honoring the first 1,000 adults and juveniles to complete drug courts in West Virginia say the programs saved their lives and their relationships with their families.

The drug court staff “saw more in me than I saw in myself,” said Chrystal Webb of Wheeling. “It was when my pain and my fear collided that I was given a gift,” she told several hundred people gathered in the lower rotunda of the Capitol.

Supreme Court Justice Brent Benjamin, Governor Earl Ray Tomblin, and Senate President William P. Cole III spoke and then helped unfurl a paper ring chain representing West Virginia treatment court graduates. Each ring contained the initials of a graduate of an adult or juvenile drug court.

Gov. Tomblin said, “Substance abuse has touched all of us in one way or another.” The executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government have worked together on legislation and programs to address that problem in many ways, and will continue to do so.

“We must work together,” Governor Tomblin said. “I hope you all are encouraged in the difference we are making in the lives of so many.”

Gov. Tomblin thanked Justice Benjamin for providing leadership on the expansion of drug courts throughout West Virginia.

Justice Benjamin said, “It’s not a rich person’s problem. It’s not a poor person’s problem. It’s not a Democrat problem. It’s not a Republican problem. ... The drug court program is not one just of the judiciary. It is very much a collaborative one of the other branches of government.”

Since Ms. Webb completed her drug court process, she has received credentials as a minister, completed her GED and an associate’s degree in criminal justice, and has become a certified recovery coach. She has a better relationship with her husband and children. For the first time in years, her mother “can sleep sound and not wake in fear of what the day may bring because of my addiction,” Ms. Webb said.

Nicholas Harrison of Augusta said, “If I had not participated in drug court, I know in my heart I would not be here today. It has given me a life I never would have dreamed possible. ... I heard I was not a bad person, I was a sick person.”

Senate President William P. Cole, III, said, "I believe in the value of a second chance, and the success achieved by the graduates with us today show that value is well placed.

"These programs, both the adult and juvenile drug court programs, provide hope to families that they will not have to deal with this alone, and they will not have to worry about their family member simply being locked up and forgotten. Instead, that person will be cared for with respect, and pushed to rehabilitate themselves. They do not have to become another jailhouse statistic," President Cole said.

Besides helping people, drug courts also help the state budget because they lead to reduced re-arrests, fewer court hearings, and fewer people in detention centers, President Cole said.

"Saving money is good. Saving lives is fantastic," said First Judicial Circuit (Brooke, Hancock, and Ohio Counties) Judge Martin J. Gaughan.

Judge Gaughan emphasized that drug courts are not easy, and some participants eventually choose to go to jail rather than continue. He tells drug offenders that the pen he uses to sign their case orders is not a magic wand. "All of the people in the treatment courts have the magic wands, if they will only help themselves," he said.

"My drug court produced over one-third of these lives, not because we are so good at it but because we have been doing it for so long," Judge Gaughan said.

West Virginia's first adult drug court was established in the Northern Panhandle in 2005 under the leadership of Judge Gaughan and then-First Circuit Chief Probation Officer Jim Lee. The Supreme Court's first juvenile adult court was established in Cabell County in 2007 under the leadership of Sixth Circuit Family Court Patricia A. Keller.

In 2009 and 2011 respectively, the West Virginia Legislature enacted legislation which codified adult and juvenile drug courts in West Virginia under the administration, control and responsibility of the Supreme Court. As part of the Justice Reinvestment Act passed in 2014, adult drug courts will be established in all of West Virginia's counties by July 1, 2016.

There currently are twenty-four adult drug court programs serving forty counties and sixteen juvenile drug court programs serving twenty counties.

Currently, 581 individuals are actively participating in adult and juvenile drug court programs in West Virginia. The savings to West Virginia taxpayers in incarceration costs alone for these participants is approximately \$21 million per year.

Justice Benjamin agrees. "Without intervention, drug recurrence rates are as high as 80 percent for drug offenders who are simply incarcerated. That rate drops to less than 10 percent for graduates of West Virginia's adult drug courts, and to less than 14 percent for graduates of West Virginia's juvenile drug courts. This success is crucial to ending the repeating cycle of drug abuse, victimization and crime in our State."

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