



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

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Drug Court Day celebrates 1,300-plus graduates

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. – Nick Harrison was once a drug addict who had no contact with his children and had given up hope of having a better life. Now he is the department head of the City of Bluefield Grounds and Maintenance Department, he is happily married, and he has a close relationship with his children and step-children.

And he credits the Mercer County Adult Drug Court with the changes.

“I learned that I was not a bad person, merely a sick person. That knowledge gave me a great sense of relief and freedom,” he told more than 100 people gathered in the Capitol Rotunda Thursday, March 10, to celebrate Drug Court Day at the Legislature.

“Because of my recovery I have a career today that I love,” he said. “Without the opportunity to participate in drug court, I know in my heart I would not be alive today.”

Drug Court Day was held to honor the 1,343 graduates of West Virginia’s adult and juvenile drug courts. Governor Earl Ray Tomblin, Senate President William P. Cole III, and representatives of U.S. Senators Shelley Moore Capito and Joe Manchin spoke.

Before Justice Brent Benjamin introduced Mr. Harrison and two other drug court graduates, Justice Benjamin spoke in remembrance of the more than 6,000 West Virginians who have died from drug-related causes in the last eleven years – the time period drug courts have served West Virginians. As he spoke, black balloons fell from the second-floor of the rotunda.

“Each of these balloons represents ten people. Ten lives lost. Ten families who lost someone they loved. Ten sets of friends who lost someone they cared about. Then people who, if they had not fallen victim to drug abuse, could have contributed to our state,” Justice Benjamin said.

“It’s not easy to quit. That’s why people need help. That’s why treatment courts are needed. And that’s why we should celebrate each precious life that is saved,” Justice Benjamin said. Multi-colored balloons then fell, each balloon representing ten drug court graduates. “Each graduate is a victory multiplied. Each

graduate has a family that is not mourning. Each graduate is now a contributing member of our society.”

Kelly Stickler credits the Cabell Huntington Adult Drug Court with helping her turn her life around. She is attending Huntington Junior College, where she maintains a 4.00 GPA. Kelly also graduated the Peer Support Specialist Class at Recovery Point and is taking the test for her Recovery Coach Certification. She is employed full time as a Program Assistant at First Steps Wellness and Recovery Center.

Sixteen-year-old William Fields, a junior at Jefferson High School, spoke briefly about what the Eastern Panhandle Juvenile Drug Court has done for him. He now plays on his school’s varsity basketball team, is on the honor roll, and he plans to go to college and major in cyber security.

Governor Tomblin said, “My administration has made the fight against substance abuse a top priority. We remain committed to making sure those struggling can find help and hope in West Virginia, and our state’s drug courts play a critical role in this effort. Thanks to our collective efforts, more than a thousand individuals have graduated from the drug court system and are now on their way toward living positive, productive lives in the Mountain State.”

Senate President Cole said, “The value of our state’s drug court programs cannot be overstated. This is especially true of the 15 juvenile drug courts that serve 20 of our counties. West Virginia’s young people are falling victim to this epidemic now more than ever.

“The answer is not locking these children up in a juvenile detention facility and forgetting about them,” President Cole said. “The answer is early intervention. These courts have proven to be an invaluable resource in getting youthful offenders the tools they need to overcome this tough time and get on the path to wellness.

President Cole told the graduates, “I hope you take a moment to feel a huge sense of pride for a job well done. I hope that accomplishment is a driver for your continued success. You have overcome tremendous obstacles and circumstances to reach this point, and you are an inspiration to those who are in need of help.”

“Drug courts and other treatment alternatives to incarceration play a vital role in overcoming addiction,” U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito said in a statement read by her State Director, Mary Elisabeth Eckerson. “In West Virginia, these programs have a proven record of success with counties offering drug courts seeing cost savings and declining recidivism rates among graduates. That’s why I voted to advance the *Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act* this week, legislation that directs resources to programs like these that have proven successful. I offer my congratulations to today’s graduates, and I am hopeful that together we can work toward a drug-free West Virginia.”

“Drug Court programs provide participants an opportunity to overcome addiction and to make a major change in the quality of life for themselves and their families,” Senator Manchin said in a statement read by Michael Browning, his regional coordinator. “Since the first drug court began in 2005 in the Northern Panhandle, countless West Virginians and their families have conquered addiction.

“Drug abuse and addiction is a problem in every state in the nation, and I appreciate everyone involved in this court for helping these individuals achieve

success,” Senator Manchin said. “I congratulate the individuals who have graduated from these programs and those who helped them along the way.”

The 2014 Justice Reinvestment Act required adult drug courts to serve all of West Virginia’s counties by July 1, 2016. There now are 27 adult drug court programs serving 45 counties. Three additional drug courts are planned to cover the Third (Doddridge, Pleasants, Ritchie Counties), Fourteenth (Braxton, Clay, Gilmer, and Webster Counties), and Thirtieth (Mingo County) Judicial Circuits.

There are 15 operational juvenile drug courts serving 20 counties: Berkeley, Boone, Brooke, Hancock, Harrison, Jefferson, Kanawha, Lincoln, Logan, McDowell, Mercer, Monongalia, Ohio, Pleasants, Putnam, Raleigh, Randolph, Wayne, Wirt, and Wood.

There have been 857 graduates from adult drug courts, a graduation rate of 52 percent. There are 487 active participants. The recidivism rate for adult drug court graduates over two years is 9.4 percent. The one-year, post-graduate recidivism rate is 1.88 percent. That compares to a nearly 80 percent recidivism rate for incarcerated drug offenders. The average annual cost to serve an adult drug court participant is \$7,100, compared to an annual incarceration cost of \$17,611 in jail or \$28,369 in prison.

There have been 506 graduates from West Virginia’s juvenile drug courts, a graduation rate of 50.5 percent. There are 194 active cases. The recidivism rate for juvenile drug court graduates is 14.6 percent, compared to a 55.1 percent rate for youths in traditional juvenile probation programs. For FY 2012-13, the average cost to serve each graduating youth was \$6,900, compared to \$96,000 per person in a Division of Juvenile Services facility, \$44,000 per person in a residential group facility, or \$99,000 per person in a hospital treatment facility.

Adult and juvenile drug courts are open only to non-violent offenders whose underlying crimes are linked to substance abuse. Referrals are made by judicial officers, law enforcement, probation officers, prosecutors, and defense attorneys. Juveniles also can be referred by school personnel, parents, and child protective services/youth workers.

Both adult and juvenile drug court programs have multiple phases and minimum lengths. Both require intensive supervision; frequent, random, and observed drug testing; counseling sessions; regular meetings with probation officers; appropriate sanctions and incentives; and other rehabilitative services. Juvenile drug courts also involve family participation and promote self-sufficiency.

West Virginia’s first adult drug court was established in the Northern Panhandle in 2005. The Supreme Court’s first juvenile adult court was established in Cabell County in 2007. (The Cabell County juvenile drug court had been established in 1999 with a federal grant. After it ran out, the Supreme Court re-established the program.)