

# Judges say drug courts save money and lives

January 13, 2006

Drug courts save lives and millions of dollars, U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett, a pioneer of drug courts in Mississippi, said Friday.

Judge Starrett, of McComb; his successor on the state 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit District bench, Judge Michael Taylor of Brookhaven; and Lincoln County Circuit Clerk Terry Lynn Watkins conducted a panel discussion about drug courts during the Circuit Court Clerks Statewide Seminar in Jackson.

“Every drug court of any size, if it is run correctly, will save the state a minimum of \$1 million a year,” Judge Starrett said.

Fifteen drug courts now operate in the state, and six others are in planning stages.

Judge Starrett said the Legislature in 2003 created a consistent funding mechanism that will allow creation of more drug courts. A special assessment on misdemeanor and felony fines goes to support drug court programs.

Judge Taylor said it costs about \$250,000 a year to run the Drug Court program in Lincoln, Pike and Walthall counties. For the price of housing about a dozen people in prison for a year, 180 people are enrolled in the treatment-oriented program. Last year, drug court participants in the 14<sup>th</sup> District paid \$119,230 in fines and more than \$41,000 in fees at the rate of \$50 per person per month to participate in the program.

“As a state, we’re too poor not to have drug courts for these people,” Judge Taylor said.

Watkins said drug courts are a powerful tool for fine collections. One of the requirements for completion of the drug court program is payment of fines. “They have to keep a job and pay on their fines,” Watkins said. “We are able to collect the money that these people owe our counties.”

But the judges and Watkins agreed that the biggest savings is in human lives.

Watkins said, “The most gratifying thing for me is seeing the difference Drug Court has made in their lives.”

Judge Taylor said, “It starts making a difference in our community.”

Greene County Circuit Clerk Scharlotte Fortinberry [cq], whose county is part of the 19<sup>th</sup> District Drug Court, cited an example of how participants gave back to their community. At Christmas, they adopted needy families and paid for gifts.

Holmes County Circuit Court Clerk Earline Hart said she’s been moved to tears by some of the human stories she’s heard at drug court training conferences. She’s also brimming with excitement because the 21<sup>st</sup> Circuit Court District, which includes Holmes, Humphreys and Yazoo Counties, is just getting its Drug Court program started.

Judge Starrett said about 85 percent of the people who successfully completed the 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court during his tenure had no new arrests after a year. The recidivism rate for conventional sentences is much higher. The difference, Judge Starrett said, is long-term treatment and monitoring. The 14<sup>th</sup> District Drug Court requires four years for completion for crack cocaine users and three years for all other drug addicts. Drug courts use drug treatment, intensive supervision, drug testing, and immediate sanctions and incentives.

Judge Starrett estimated that the average drug addict will commit 50 felonies within a year to feed a drug habit. They steal lawn mowers, write bad checks and do whatever it takes to get money for

drugs.

“The criminal justice system in this country has become a revolving door because of ...drugs and alcohol,” Judge Starrett said.

Judge Starrett said a workout on a treadmill led him to a solution to the revolving door.

During a 1998 conference of Mississippi and Louisiana judges, he struck up a conversation with a Louisiana judge as both were working out on treadmills during a break. He talked about his frustrations at seeing the same people come before him repeatedly for crimes rooted in drug use. The judge on the treadmill next to him was Judge William D. Hunter of Franklin, La., who founded Louisiana’s first drug court and has gained national recognition for his efforts in showing other judges how it’s done. Judge Starrett said he had never heard of a drug court until then.

“I don’t think anything happens without a reason,” said Judge Starrett, who created Mississippi’s first felony adult drug court for Lincoln, Pike and Walthall counties in 1999. He has been a mentor to others who have founded drug court programs.

“He’s the Johnny Appleseed of drug courts,” said Judge Taylor, who took Judge Starrett’s place as a circuit judge and head of the 14<sup>th</sup> Circuit Drug Court in February 2005 after Judge Starrett was appointed to the federal bench in December 2004.

Harrison County Circuit Clerk Gayle Parker said to Judge Starrett, “Without your being persistent like you have been in Mississippi, I don’t think the drug courts would have caught on.” Her district has a Drug Court. “It’s been a wonderful program. A lot of these are young kids, first time offenders,” she said.

For more information about drug courts in Mississippi, go to the web site of the Mississippi Supreme Court, [www.mssc.state.ms.us](http://www.mssc.state.ms.us), then click on “AOC.”

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