

Rankin County Youth Drug Court begins operation

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The Rankin County Youth Court has established a Drug Court.

Nine teenagers have been enrolled since late November, and the number is expected to grow to 12 by the end of the week.

Rankin County Court Judge Thomas Broome, who handles Rankin County Youth Court matters, created the Drug Court program to address the high percentage of juveniles who come into Youth Court with substance abuse problems. Judge Broome said the program will provide counseling, treatment and supervision to help teenagers before the grip of drug addiction drags them into serious criminal behavior.

The mission of the program is to promote drug-free living through intense supervision, accountability, family involvement and effective treatment to improve the quality of life for juveniles, their families and the community.

The program focuses on high-risk teens ages 12 to 17 who have appeared before the Youth Court on non-violent delinquent offenses and who have been diagnosed with substance abuse or dependency.

“With the delinquent children we see coming through Youth Court, drugs and alcohol are usually at the root of every problem, whether it be domestic violence in the home or disorderly conduct or even assaults involving other children,” Judge Broome said.

Paul Bowen, Youth Court Administrator and Drug Court Coordinator, estimated that 85 to 90 percent of the juveniles who come into Youth Court test positive for drug or alcohol use. While a drug or alcohol offense may not be what landed the juveniles in Youth Court, those are the underlying problems.

“It’s rare that someone comes through and tests negative,” Bowen said.

Judge Broome said, “If you can eliminate the drugs and alcohol, children’s judgment improves and they don’t find themselves in the bad situations that they often do when they are trying to either use drugs or buy drugs.”

Many of the children in Youth Court have progressed beyond experimentation with drugs, but haven’t reached the stage of addiction. Judge Broome said intervention is crucial.

“It is an opportunity to make a difference where a child has not progressed to the next level of usage, and you can still offer rehabilitation for that child,” Judge Broome said. “With some of these drugs that are on the market now, both illegal and prescription drugs, once you become addicted it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to remove those drugs from your life. And if they never graduate to those types of drugs, then their lives and their families’ lives will be that much better.”

The Drug Court program has four phases designed to take a minimum of eight months to complete, and can last up to 18 months. The first month is the most intense phase. In that first month, teens each week will have one individual therapy session, two group therapy sessions and two family therapy sessions and one appointment each week with the case manager. They must appear in court twice during the first month, and remain under house arrest. They will meet with a probation officer and be drug-tested three times a week. Phases two, three and four include family, group and individual therapy as well as court appearances, with the number of sessions and appearances scaled back at

each phase.

Participants must have a parent or an interested adult who is committed to complying with the program's rules and regulations and participating throughout all phases of the program.

"It requires commitment on the part of the children and the parents," Judge Broome said.

Many of the parents are searching for help. Drug Court "offers them an opportunity to work together on something that is productive, and it gives them a forum to talk. It opens up the lines of communications again," Judge Broome said.

Outpatient therapy is provided by Region 8 Mental Health Center.

"We will be saving the taxpayers' money because these children will not be in residential treatment, which is extremely expensive, and they will be able to develop real world coping skills at home," Judge Broome said.

The Rankin County Board of Supervisors has agreed to pay the up-front costs, Judge Broome said. The Drug Court will seek reimbursement from the Administrative Office of Courts, which administers the state Drug Court Fund.

Funding regulations allow reimbursement at a rate of up to \$6,000 a year for each juvenile drug court participant. At maximum capacity, the program could cost about \$240,000 a year.

Judge Broome said he expects the program's capacity to be about 40 participants.

Judge Broome, Bowen and the Drug Court team have worked for about two years to make the program a reality. Team members attended their first training session in January 2005.

Judge Broome used some elements of the drug court model of treatment, counseling and supervision for some individuals before the program was formalized and fully operational.

Members of the Drug Court team began meeting with Rankin County parents to offer the program on a formal basis in late November.

Other members of the Drug Court team include Youth Court Probation Officer Brooke Walley, Case Manager Katrina Phillips, Region 8 Mental Health Center Therapist Tasha Johnson, Youth Court Prosecutor Amanda Lingold, and Public Defender Connie Jones.

Eighteen drug courts operate in Mississippi. The Rankin County Youth Drug Court program is the fourth of its kind in the state. Three other juvenile drug courts operate in Adams, DeSoto and Madison counties. There are 14 adult drug courts. More than 1,000 people are enrolled in drug courts statewide.

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