

Pine Belt area courts plan combined ceremony

May 4, 2009

Two South Mississippi drug courts and a federal court program will gather on May 15 to celebrate individual accomplishments and a shared mission of rehabilitating people who struggle with drug addiction.

The 12th and 15th Circuit Drug Courts and the U.S. District Court Re-entry and Pretrial Supervision Program will participate in a ceremony scheduled for 10 a.m. May 15 at the Lynn Cartlidge Forrest County Multi Purpose Center in Hattiesburg.

About 600 people, including drug court participants and their families and friends, are expected to attend, said Circuit Judge Robert Helfrich of Hattiesburg, who supervises the 12th Circuit Drug Court in Forrest and Perry counties.

About 15 people are expected to graduate from the 12th Circuit program, said Drug Court Coordinator Lucy Bates Davenport. About 220 people are enrolled in the program.

At least seven are expected to graduate from the federal court program. About 60 people participate in the program, said U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett.

The 15th Circuit Drug Court does not yet have participants ready to graduate. About 130 people are enrolled. Circuit Judge Prentiss Harrell founded the program in 2007 to serve the district which includes Jefferson Davis, Lamar, Lawrence, Marion and Pearl River counties.

May is National Drug Court Month. Many of the 31 drug court programs around the state are celebrating with graduations, advancement ceremonies or other special programs during the month.

May 15 is National Commencement Day, with drug court programs across the nation celebrating the twentieth year of the drug court movement.

The drug court movement in Mississippi is 10 years old.

Judge Helfrich called the drug court movement the biggest change in the history of the criminal justice system.

“The bottom line is it works. It saves money. It saves lives,” Judge Helfrich said.

Drug courts seek to rehabilitate drug-using offenders through drug treatment and intense supervision with drug testing and frequent court appearances. Drug courts offer the incentive of a chance to remain out of jail, and the sanction of a jail sentence if participants fail to remain drug-free and in compliance with all program requirements. Drug courts require participants to get and keep a job, do community service work, pay fines and fees, and to work toward obtaining a General Education Development (GED) degree if they dropped out of school.

Judge Helfrich said, “Addiction is a generational disease and when we can keep a parent at home working, living clean, being an example for their children, we have the chance of breaking that cycle of addiction, whereas before we were sending these parents to prison and we were left to take care of the children.

“Most of these drug court participants are people that nobody has ever offered a hand to help up, and when they accept the hand of help and they are successful at it, it’s incredibly rewarding,” Judge Helfrich said. “The transformation is why judges do it, because it is the most rewarding thing any of the judges have ever done.”

Drug courts work to help participants live clean and sober and to give them skills to support themselves and their families.

Judge Harrell said many of the participants have never before been forced to critically evaluate themselves. He requires his program participants to take a look at themselves and write a paper describing where they expect to be in five years. He also requires them to write a resume’.

“Most of them never wrote a resume’, and they don’t know how lacking they are until they write a resume’,” Judge Harrell said.

The first drug court was founded in 1989 in Miami. There are now more than 2,300 drug courts nationwide serving 120,000 people every year, said West Huddleston III, chief executive officer of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals.

In Mississippi, 2,188 people were enrolled in drug courts at the end of March, according to the Administrative Office of Courts.

Judge Starrett, who serves on the Board of Directors of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, founded the first felony drug court in Mississippi in 1999 when he was a state circuit judge in the 14th District of Lincoln, Pike and Walthall counties. It was an effort born out of frustration at trying to deal with drug addicts who repeatedly committed crimes to feed their addiction.

“I tried treatment. It tried every program that was available to a circuit judge. It was a revolving door. They kept going to prison, coming home and going back,” Judge Starrett said.

After hearing about the drug court concept from a Louisiana judge, he started a program on a shoestring budget. His program became the model for others.

After he became a federal judge, he sent a few people from his court in Hattiesburg to the 12th Circuit Drug Court supervised by Judge Helfrich. About two years ago Judge Starrett started the U.S. District Court’s Re-entry and Pretrial Supervision Program. The re-entry program is for people who have served their sentences and returned to the community on probation. It uses the drug court model.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Mike Parker of Hattiesburg orders some people awaiting trial into the program for supervision. Judge Parker headed Hinds County’s felony drug court program as a County Court judge before he joined the federal bench.

Drug testing and intensive supervision helps people avoid lapsing back into drug use. “It’s dramatically cut down on my technical violations and revocation hearings,” Judge Starrett said.

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