

19th Circuit Drug Court to hold graduation March 24 in Pascagoula

March 19, 2015

A woman who found drug treatment and assistance through the military veterans track of the 19th Circuit Drug Court will be the keynote speaker at the program's March 24 graduation in Pascagoula.

The ceremony is at 1 p.m. at the Old Jackson County Courthouse on Magnolia Street in Pascagoula. The ceremony will be in the old Circuit Court courtroom.

Eight people are expected to graduate. Circuit Judge Robert P. Krebs will preside. The public is invited.

The speaker, who served in the Army National Guard, is the first to graduate from the military track of the 19th Circuit Drug Court. Judge Krebs created the program aimed at the needs of military veterans in Jackson, George and Greene counties two years ago. The program helps connect veterans with needed resources, including treatment provided through the Veterans Administration. Participants are paired with other veterans as mentors.

Drug courts seek to rehabilitate drug-using offenders through drug treatment and intense supervision with frequent court appearances and drug testing. Drug courts offer the incentive of a chance to remain out of jail and be employed, or the sanction of a prison sentence if participants fail to remain drug-free and in compliance with all program requirements. Two graduates completed the two-year program without any violations.

The eight graduates' participation in the Drug Court program saved the state an estimated \$337,400 in incarceration costs. Statewide, drug courts provided an estimated \$46 million savings in incarceration costs in 2014, according to State Drug Court Coordinator Joey Craft.

Drug Court requirements include paying all fines and fees, keeping a job and doing community service work. The eight graduates paid a total of \$35,286.50 in fines and court costs and performed 1,965 hours of community service work, said 19th District Drug Court Case Manager Crystal Gaspard.

Participants must earn a GED if they don't already have a high school diploma. Three earned a GED while in the program. Four received parenting certificates. Only two of the graduates had valid driver licenses when they entered the program. The six who had suspended licenses have had their licenses reinstated.

Mississippi currently has 40 drug courts. About 3,000 people are enrolled in drug courts statewide. Participants in the state's 22 felony adult drug courts last year paid \$1,146,991.31 in fines – money which was returned to county treasuries. Felony adult drug courts collected \$1,403,750.72 in fees from participants in 2014, Craft said. Those funds help offset the costs of operating drug court programs. During calendar year 2014, 646 people graduated from drug court programs statewide, and 68 babies were born drug-free to women enrolled in drug courts.

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