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Mental Health Court program making a difference

By MARK NEWMAN Courier staff writer

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The Mental Health Supervision Program within the Eighth Judicial District Department of Correctional Services accepts non-violent offenders with mental illnesses after they've been through the trial process and faced their consequences. When they are placed on probation or let out of prison on parole, participants who meet the criteria get a much more in-depth experience than the general offender.

Parole officers may have so many cases, only the ones having big problems get any attention. For others, an officer may ask questions, put a checkmark next to the answer and move on to the next case. This program is different.

"My [clients] learn we're going to have a long conversation," said Kurt Rosenberg, a probation parole officer with the Eighth Judicial District Department of Correctional Services. "I see each client once a week at least."

If the concentrated caseload of "just" 25 offenders was added to a PO's duties, those 25 would end up occupying that officer's entire day, he said.

After a while, Rosenberg can tell if clients are doing the things they need to do and help turn those things into good habits. For example, doctors say some patients with mental health issues do not regularly take their prescribed medication. Rosenberg can often tell if that is the situation, at which point he will encourage them to do so and explain the benefits of doing so. He has the time to spend on just two dozen cases.

"That's why this is a long-term program, dealing with long-term problems," said Judge Kirk Daily of the Eighth Judicial District. "These offenders wouldn't make it through [regular] probation."

In addition to his other duties as a judge, Daily volunteered to be part of the mental health corrections team. This mental health team focuses on a maximum of 25 clients. The whole team sees every client a couple times each month. Daily, Rosenberg, a therapist, a defense attorney and a prosecutor are all present in court.

"It can mean a lot to someone if the prosecutor who prosecuted their case ... sent them to prison in their [mind] ... tells them they're glad to see the progress they're making," said Daily.

Like many offenders, those with mental illness may refuse to accept personal responsibility or may make poor decisions. A regular offender may go through life believing he went to jail because a neighbor reported his crime or because a police officer arrested him.

"So many of the people coming into the justice system have the same issues," the judge said.

Rosenberg said offenders typically have very short-term goals: I want to feel good right now. Afterward is when they worry about consequences, when it's too late. But part of this program is education. The team can spend time explaining what really seems to be getting the participant into trouble.

"I'll ask them, 'Who made that decision? Was it a good decision? Why do you think you made that decision?'" said Daily.

Rosenberg can arrange for instruction on good decision making. Their mental illness, quite possibly untreated, may get in the way of the offender's true personality. Positive strategies have to become habits, he said.

"We can't just tell them, 'Don't do that again,'" Daily agreed.

The strategy calls for less reprimanding and more encouraging.

There's praise and encouragement for doing well. And a focus on the good things in their lives because there are always ups and downs on the "roller coaster" of life, both men said. Having something positive to focus on can help avoid the feeling of hopelessness that affects some people with mental illness.

"We need to stabilize their lives first, then work on recovery," Rosenberg said.

In fact, except in some cases of violent crime, said Daily, this would be a good system for most offenders. Unfortunately, the whole program is very time consuming and costs too much to use for every case. Working full time, Rosenberg can have no more than 25 clients.

"A lot more people want to be in the program than we have room for," said Daily.

They have to be very selective who they admit into the program.

"There are people we may not be able to help ... and those we believe we can help," the judge said. Those are the people who get into the program.

When they first come in, they may deny they have a problem, Rosenberg said. They eventually acknowledge their issues and begin work on resolving them.

"That growth is great to see," he said.

Daily said the eventual goal is that the participants do the right things without being guided.

"We've had a large number success stories, but how do you define success?" asked Rosenberg.

It's more complicated than with the typical offender. There, staying out of jail and holding a job may be success for nearly every offender. For an offender with mental illness, taking their medication consistently may be a big first goal. For another, stopping drinking may be the goal, or reconnecting with family, or learning how to make good decisions. It will be different for every client, the officer said.

Working as a team allows them to better come up with solutions by approaching problems from different directions.

"... so we can determine what's best for that client," said Rosenberg.

Doesn't the court and law enforcement normally talk about what's best for society?

"In the long term, what's best for the client is also best for society," Rosenberg said.

Having a stable participant is better for the offender's family, for the neighbors, for police officers; it's better for overfull state mental hospitals and prisons, too, he said.

Actually, added the judge, it's also good for taxpayers. Being in the probation and parole system costs \$3.66 per offender per day. A system like the Mental Health Supervision Program may cost more — but not as much as the \$84.85 it costs to spend a day in prison.

So the mental health program is less expensive, "and we think more effective," said Daily.

But the main reason the judge and the officer do the job is because they can see the difference they're making.

"We show them ... this isn't just about meeting the terms of your probation," said Daily. "This is about changing your life."