

Drug court alternative to prison

'Non adversarial' program allows another option for substance abusers

By BRIAN CHAMBERS

News Editor

Reprinted with permission from the Albia Newspapers



Pam Post, as well as other drug court clients, must sit with a panel and review their progress on a regular basis. Above, Post (foreground) is pictured with defense attorney Joseph Goedken, Jennifer Brereton, SIEDA, prosecuting attorney Ron Kelly and probation officer Sandra Arendt.

Last Thursday was another day in the third floor courtroom of the Wapello County Courthouse for Pam Post of Lovilia. It is the same courtroom where she has spent each Thursday afternoon since June of last year attending weekly sessions of Drug Court, a 15 to 18-month program that targets substance abuse offenders by giving them an alternative to prison and a chance to change their lives. And by admission, Post certainly needed to change hers.

Post had had a storied past that has included two marriages, three children, two sons and a daughter and a 20-year addiction to meth. She has also worked at Pella Corporation and has a degree in Robotics from Indian Hills Community College. Post has also spent time in the Mitchellville correctional facility and has been arrested numerous times—all tied one way or another to her addiction.

Over the years jobs came and went, money targeted for taxes or essential items were spent on drugs. She alienated family members and many times was unable to take care of her children.

“The kids had to stay with Mom and Dad a lot. They would come and stay with me for a while but when I would start using again Dad would come and get them,” she said. Post even missed her middle son’s high school prom and graduation.

“I was so messed up I didn’t have invitations. My folks had to handle everything,” As with many addicts, Post hit rock bottom. Her family would not speak to her, her husband had all but thrown in the towel and she was ostracized in the community. Then along came a final chance—Drug Court.

Drug Court is a relatively new program—at least for the Eight Judicial District—beginning in January 2007. Other districts have adopted the program over the years and now it is statewide. The results vary—and with the Eight District it is too early to tell—but overall it is viewed as a viable alternative to prison time and has had a measure of success.

“It has been very positive,” Sandra Arendt, Drug Court probation officer for the Eighth District said of program. “There have been no positive UAs since October 2007.” What Arendt was referring to is the urinalysis testing the drug court “clients” must undergo randomly with only a few hours notice. It is only one of many measures the five-phase program requires to those who participate. Others are to attend court weekly (in the first phase) comply with curfews, undergo treatment for addiction, pay all fines, weekly meetings with probation officers and comply with the High Risk Unit’s home visits and curfew checks.

Drug Court keeps its clients—currently 21—on a short leash that is pulled each day beginning by 8:30 a.m. with a call into Arendt’s office. An answering machine announces the color of the day, which dictates actions that may or may not have to be taken. Post explained the color of the day and how each morning for the last 14 months she has called in find out if she has to drop a UA that day. Each client is assigned a color and if the color of the day is her color, then she heads to Ottumwa where she undergoes testing.

“Sometimes it is two to three times a week,” she said. And at times it is not limited to one color. “Some days are all color days,” she added. “Then everybody has to go in.” Post also spoke about the unscheduled visits conducted by the court’s High Risk Unit that can happen any time of day or night.

“Two weeks ago on a Sunday night they came to the house at 12:30 in the morning. I had to drop a UA and they gave me a Breathalyzer test,” she said. The program is fraught with rules that all clients must abide by or face sanctions. Attendance at court, meetings with probation officers, mental health specialists and

Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous gatherings is mandatory, no exceptions. Post said that if a court date is missed, it could automatically be two days in jail.

Other sanctions are not quite as severe but they could delay moving to the next step in the program--- with each step being closer to complete recovery and eventual release from probation. In addition, as clients move from one phase to another, the rules are less strict and they are allowed more freedom of movement, which provides an incentive to abide by the guidelines set down by the court.



Post approaches Judge Richard Meadows and signs the agreement that tracts her progress.

For example, in Phase I, clients must attend court weekly, meet with a counselor each week, meet with probation officer and comply with a 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew. In Phase II the curfew is backed off to 10 p.m. and court is attended once every two weeks. In Phase III curfew is an hour later but in order for the client to move to the next phase all fines must be paid and he or she must be employed at least 32 hours per week. This phase was where Post had some difficulty.

The fines weren't the problem, as she had paid them all in full, it was the employment. Since she has lived in the area since high school her past activities were well known and employers were not overly enthusiastic about offering her a job. "After I had been in trouble so much I had trouble finding a job, I couldn't find a job in Albia," said Post. Eventually she did land a position at Menards in Ottumwa working early mornings cleaning the store. It was the only job she could find and since employment was a requirement in the program, she took it and makes the commute daily between Lovilia to Ottumwa. Every client does, there is no alternative in drug court. What they say, goes. Period.

Although curfews and meeting attendance relax somewhat through the phases, other requirements do not. As long as a client is in the program random drug testing is required, maintaining a secure and sober lifestyle and providing documentation of treatment activities remain strict and monitored by Arendt, as she is the probation officer all clients report to. She calls the shots, but not too harshly.

The program is "non adversarial" by design, promoting support rather than punishment. When a client takes a step backward or breaks a rule, Arendt doesn't consider it grounds for severe retribution, it is one of the reasons whatever is doled out are called sanctions. "When someone breaks the rules, we consider it a lapse rather than a relapse," she said. "We encourage them to dust off and go on toward the goal."

This “non adversarial” atmosphere is evident in the courtroom when the clients must go before the judge and a panel of four that include Arendt, defense attorney Joseph Goedken, Jennifer Brereton, from SEIDA treatment services, and prosecuting attorney Ron Kelly. The presiding judge is E. Richard Meadows, who fits the drug court into his schedule each week.

Although the look of the room is no different than any other courtroom, the feel is different. Smiles replace frowns and applause over accomplishments is not uncommon. Most of the groundwork has already been laid and Meadows reviews accomplishments by the client over the past week, two weeks or month commensurate with whatever phase he or she is in.

When Post, who is in the fifth and final phase of the program, came before Meadows last Thursday he smiled and asked if she was excited to go to work. “I like the job, I got a raise and they are training me to be a cashier,” she replied.

Arendt asked her if medical treatments are going well—Post, due to her drug use, is receiving chemotherapy for a liver disease and the court as part of her probation enforces treatments—and she replied she was on track and the disease was in remission. Kelly, the defense attorney, told her that she had been “doing great” and that she is almost done. “You have a September 4 graduation date. Are you ready?” he asked. Post, obviously a little nervous, replied that she was. The judge smiled.

So it went with the half a dozen other clients scheduled that day. Each was provided with some form of accolade as to his or her accomplishments. And in return, each commented on how the program had helped them take responsibility and kick their habit—without going to prison.

One client, Tony, spoke about how he had been an addict for 27 years and nothing else worked until he found himself in Drug Court. “I learned I was an addict, that I had to change friends and my lifestyle. This has been a positive step forward,” he said.

The judge asked another, Melissa, about how she was getting along with her job. “I like my job,” she said. The judge laughed and commented on how, when she was first enrolled, she was allergic to work. “What changed?” he asked her.

Melissa didn’t have an answer other than to say where she worked at her boys could stop by and see her.

It was a packed courtroom last Thursday, which is not usually the case. Most of the time only the clients that are scheduled to appear show up, except of course for Post, as she attends each one to lend support to the others. But it was a special day; the court was “graduating” the first client, Chris Hulbert. The judge called it “all client day” and everyone was required to attend to witness the event.

Meadows spoke to Hulbert, congratulated him on his accomplishment, and asked him if he was ready.

“If I am not ready now, then I’ll never be,” Hulbert said.

Defense Attorney Joe Goedken presented Hulbert to the group and remarked on his accomplishment and how far he had come since the he started. He then shook his hand and wished him well in the future. It was not an average courtroom scene, especially when the group—once Hulbert was presented with his certificate—broke for cake and punch in celebration of one of their own staying out of prison and staying sober.

Post may well be in the same limelight in September. All is on track for her to graduate and get her life back to normal—if normal is the word for it. She has a lot of baggage but, because of the last year, she said things are coming together. Her two boys are talking more to her now, especially the youngest, and she sees signs of improvement with the rest of her family, many of whom live in the area.

“Life is going better, my son called me and we talked about the floodwaters. That’s the best thing. I have my family back. My marriage is better, my family accepts me and my sister and I are talking again,” she said.

Post added that she had been clean since November 2006, the month she went back into prison for the second time. After eight months she was paroled and started Drug Court, where she has been ever since. She credits the program for her success.

“All prison did for me was to meet new people, meet up with other drug addicts and find new places to get drugs,” she said. “Drug Court offered the help I needed. It helped me to get off drugs and stay out of prison.”