

Four graduate from mental health court: State legislators hope to secure more funding for wellness program

By Amy Macavinta | Posted: Thursday, May 9, 2013 1:05 am



Judge Kevin Allen congratulates Jeannie Jensen during Mental Health Court graduation in Logan on Wednesday. Jensen completed the program with four other women and has started speaking about suicide prevention with ARISE Suicide Prevention. (Jennifer Meyers/Herald Journal)

By the numbers, taxpayers in Cache County are paying as much \$1 million per year to house people who are mentally ill and who have committed a crime, according to 1st District Court Judge Kevin Allen.

However, professionals who work with those with mental illness say it touches many people on a much more personal level than just their bank accounts.

“It doesn’t just affect them (the person with mental illness), it affects our community,” said Rep. Ed Redd, R-Logan. “It is not just about the cost of jail, or the cost of programs — it is about people’s lives.”



Utah State Sen. Lyle Hillyard, R-Logan, applauds after a speech from a Mental Health Court graduate at the 1st District Courthouse on Wednesday. (Jennifer Meyers/Herald Journal)

Redd and state Sen. Lyle Hillyard, R-Logan, were in the courtroom Wednesday when four women graduated from mental health court, a program for those with a treatable mental illness who are charged with crimes. Hillyard has pledged to seek additional state funding for the program.

All four had been arrested for crimes ranging from forgery, theft, burglary and identity fraud to driving under the influence or falsely obtaining prescription medications.

One of those women is 42-year-old Jeannie Jensen, who now lives outside of Cache Valley. Jensen, who has been charged with at least three crimes since 2009, describes herself as a woman who was once a “corporate wife.”

Jensen has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, attention deficit disorder and personality disorder. She attempted suicide more than once and she said she felt crazy, helpless and out of control.

Now, because of her success in mental health court, she has gone on to participate in a suicide prevention program and visits schools and shares her story with students.

Mental health court helped her to understand that she is not alone in her illness. Jensen had lost ties with much of her family because of her addiction and criminal behaviors. Now, she said, her children look up to her as a woman of strength and courage.

“If you think you are saving one person, you are not. You are saving several,” Jensen said. “This is a disease that can and will happen to anyone.”

Like drug court, participants must report to Allen on a regular basis, but they also work with a team of professionals who work to give them the skills needed to live with mental illness. Their path to wellness includes the proper balance of medications and therapy. Criminal charges are dismissed upon successful completion of the program.

One of those team players is Cache County Sheriff’s Lt. Doyle Peck, who said he is grateful for any help he can get.

“The mental health court program takes treatable people, pulls them out of the jail and tries to help them out,” he said.

In turn, this allows him to house the people who really need to be in the jail — but he acknowledges it is a long battle.

The jail environment is not conducive to providing long-term treatment that people with mental illness need, Peck said. Additionally, the jail does not have funding to bring in staff required to offer that level of treatment.

Currently, the mental health court is operated within the 1st District Court’s regular operating budget, and there are no funds specifically allocated to that program. And while the program has been successful, there have been some roadblocks along the way that have been a challenge to address without funding, Allen said.

Allen said even a small amount of money would be a dramatic benefit to the people in the program.

Hillyard said several years ago, he earmarked \$75,000 for a program in the 1st District’s juvenile court. Next year, he plans to seek additional funding to increase that allocation to \$100,000 and expand its definition to include the mental health court in Logan.

“I am really pleased with what Judge Allen has done with this program, and he has done it without any appropriations from the state,” Hillyard said. “My first compliment to him is that he has done a great job in touching people’s lives.”

Allen said the board has identified three areas in which that money could potentially be spent.

The first is housing, he said.

“We have no transitional housing where they can have supervision and help until they can get on their own,” he said. “Even just \$12,000 could provide two apartments all year long so we can get them out of the parks (and) out of the canyon until they can learn to take care of themselves.”

Ongoing treatment is often another challenge for mental health court participants. Either they don’t qualify for treatment through Bear River Mental Health, or they have lost their benefits if they were in jail for more than 30 days.

Mental health court funding would help those people stay on their medications until their benefits are reinstated, Allen said.

Funding might also be used to hire a coordinator who could work with the participants and help them with meetings, court hearings and assignments.

Redd, whose medical career has included providing medical care to inmates at the jail, said it has been a really good experience to watch the transformation in people as they work through the mental health court program.

“It is a great example of a community coming together to come up with a better solution,” he said.

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