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Discussion

September 17, 2013

[Drug Court association meets in Cullman](#)

By Lauren Estes [The Cullman Times](#)

Drug court graduates 90 percent of its participants statewide, but at a meeting of the Alabama Association of Drug Court Professionals in Cullman on Monday, new methods for increasing success for offenders in the program was discussed.

Cullman's program currently has a 65-70 percent graduation rate, as it holds 110 members, some with multiple charges. From the state's 90 percent, 75 percent of them do not repeat their offenses. Participants receive treatment, often beating their addiction and avoiding jail-time, as well as, returning to society and saving the state between \$46,000-\$48,000 per potential incarcerated citizen. Presiding District Judge Kim Chaney was recently elected vice president of AADCP and said he believes the program is effective because it hones in on the problem, rather than just sending offenders to jail and not providing an opportunity to overcome the addiction.

"The use of drug courts and other specialty courts as an alternative to incarceration have helped a lot of people in Alabama while saving millions of dollars," Chaney said. "I am very proud and honored to be selected to serve this association. Drug courts have proven to be efficient and cost-effective while giving individuals the opportunity to improve their lives by making better decisions. The individuals who graduate the year-long program have made many positive changes and regained who they were prior to the time addiction stole their lives. Many are able to reconnect with family members and it is my hope that they will continue to do well and be productive members of our community."

The association is made up of judges, district attorneys, defense attorneys, counselors, case managers and court

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referral officers. It represents the 69 individual adult drug courts serving 66 counties in Alabama and also supports many other specialty courts across including: 16 family drug courts, 15 juvenile drug courts, five veterans courts and 10 mental health courts.

In attendance at the meeting were Chaney, association president and Judge J. Michael Joiner, director of court services Kim Thurston, drug court coordinator Tammy Poole, Shelby County drug court public defender Barry Woodam and drug court specialist Kelly Saucer.

Thurston recalled an emotional time that reiterated why her belief in the program was so strong.

“A young man was sharing after graduating the program and was crying so hard he could barely speak,” Thurston said. “I was emotional like many others were who heard him share, but it reminded me that stories like his are what make me say ‘this is why I do this.’”

Joiner discussed multiple grants the association received totaling just short of \$2 million dollars and what encouraged his involvement with the program.

“Around \$1.3 million dollars will go directly into the drug courts and at this point, we’re hoping to provide more assistance in the rural areas,” Joiner said. “After 10 years of sending people to prison and seeing them get out after six months or a year’s time on a 10 or more years sentence, and generally going right back into that lifestyle, I knew there needed to be an alternative. The prison time was not helping their addiction, it was costing taxpayers, and the offenders would typically repeat their offenses and never get better. In Jail, they are around those that use, and even with the best treatment, they typically would not beat the addiction. Once they were released they would fall right back into it. Prisons are reserved for dangerous criminals. This program gives them every chance possible to get better, act responsible, and it’s successful.”

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Chaney said generally speaking, those who are arrested on drug charges are not dangerous.

“Sometimes you have one or two that you don’t want to see out, but overall they are normal, good people, with a bad addiction that completely changes their personality,” Chaney said. “Overall, 75 percent of graduates will never be arrested again. With the program, they are held accountable through drug screenings, responsible for paying fees, maintaining a job, providing for themselves and they are encouraged to pursue or continue an education. They receive help, support, encouragement, and tools to assist them to get on the right track and stay on track.”

“We’ve heard story after story as participants who are graduating from the program stand in front of the court room and say, ‘Drug court gave me a second chance,’ ‘Drug court helped me beat my addiction,’ and ‘Drug court saved my life,’ because it truly does if the participants will commit to it,” Joiner said.

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