

Massachusetts adds drug courts amid opiate crisis

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QUINCY (AP) - In a small courtroom in Quincy District Court, Judge Mary Beth Heffernan doles out instructions and advice the way a parent would: sometimes gently, sometimes firmly, but always with an encouraging tone.

Heffernan presides over a specialty court where defendants with substance abuse problems are closely supervised, subjected to random drug testing and required to participate in support groups and treatment programs as an alternative to jail.

Massachusetts, which now has 21 drug courts, is adding five more as the state grapples with an increase in heroin overdoses and opioid addiction that prompted Gov. Deval Patrick to declare the epidemic a public health emergency.

During a recent session, Heffernan scolded one man who had left a rehabilitation center early. "I'm going to watch you closely, and I don't want to hear any excuses. Do you understand me?" she said.

The judge praised another man who told her he had learned during recovery that "asking for help is not a weakness; it's a strength."

"Good for you. I'm proud of you," said Heffernan, the state's former public safety secretary.

The new courts are part of a goal to double the number of specialty courts in the state over the next three years. Supporters say the special sessions, which also include mental health and veterans treatment courts, allow the state to give intense support to specific groups of people who could be better helped by structured supervision rather than prison time.

All the participants are required to complete a six-month residential program, where they must find a job and are subject to drug testing up to three times a week. During the 18-month program, they meet regularly with a probation officer and go to court to report on their progress to the judge, initially on a weekly basis.

"In some ways, it's easier to go to jail than to do drug court," said Christine Pancyck, a probation

officer who has worked in the Quincy drug court for the past year.

"We require them to do a lot," she said. "It's easier to do time and say forget it."

Pancyck said 44 of the drug court's current 55 participants reported that opioids were their drug of choice, including Percocet, heroin and oxycodone.

Eric Bertoni drew a loud round of applause from his fellow drug court participants during a recent session after the judge announced he had successfully completed the first phase of the program.

Bertoni, 22, ended up in drug court after serving four months in a county jail on drug charges and violating his probation. At his worst, he said, he was taking 10 to 15 Percocet pills a day.

"For a while, I just wanted to take my sentence and get back to it," Bertoni said. "But I found another way of life. I found that I can have fun without doing illegal things."

He said the structure of the program and having to appear before the judge every week has helped keep him drug-free.

"I'm under pressure. I have to do it," he said.

Judge Mary Hogan Sullivan, a former drug court judge, said the court targets defendants who are committing crimes because of their addiction.

"The real key in my judgment is the combination of the interaction with the judge. You are held responsible for your actions almost immediately. If the defendant has a slip - they relapse - the court can respond within a week to the relapse," said Sullivan, who now presides over a veterans treatment court.

"The accountability is virtually immediate, and there is a sanction imposed. You may put someone into residential treatment, you may need to step up AA meetings, and other kinds of sanctions."

Bertoni had this advice when asked to speak to drug court participants: "Stick with it. It gets easier. If I can do it, you can do it."