

# Lawmakers debate cost effectiveness of drug courts

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<http://www.unionleader.com/Lawmakers-debate-cost-effectiveness-of-drug-courts>

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CONCORD — Several House budget writers Tuesday questioned where drug courts provide the biggest “bang for the buck” in the fight against opioid addiction.

The House Finance Committee is reviewing [Senate Bill 464](#), which provides about \$3 million to expand drug courts throughout the state.

House Finance Committee Chairman Neal Kurk, R-Weare, noted that drug courts do not provide the greatest return on spending compared to non-correctional treatment programs.

“That tells me non-prison therapeutic treatment is a much bigger bang for the buck,” Kurk told Superior Court Chief Justice Tina Nadeau.

Nadeau said that would be true with low-risk, low-need offenders but not the high-risk, frequent offenders in the drug court program.

“Low-risk offenders do not qualify,” Nadeau said. “A low-risk, low-need offender (in the drug court program) would be a waste of money.”

Bill supporters point to the success of the state’s six drug courts by lowering the percentage of released prisoners returning to jail while beating their addictions through treatment, recovery and other social services.

The cost of treating offenders in their communities is between \$8,000 and \$12,000 a year compared to state prison, which cost more than \$35,000.

The bill provides a three-tier grant program to match county contributions. Under the bill, large courts — Hillsborough, Merrimack, Rockingham, and Strafford — could receive up to \$245,000. Medium courts — Grafton, Belknap and Cheshire — could receive \$150,000, while small courts such as Coos, Carroll and Sullivan could get \$100,000.

Under the bill, alternative programs could also qualify for the grants.

In order to qualify, counties would have to apply for federal grants and be turned down before

applying for state matching funds.

Nadeau told the group that 90 percent of the program's target group have suffered some trauma. She noted many have dual diagnoses. These are repeat offenders who would be going to jail for extended periods of time, she told the committee.

Rep. David Danielson, R-Bedford, asked Nadeau why drug courts would succeed when law enforcement and Health and Human Services have failed to stem the tide of addiction.

"We're straddling two different worlds," Nadeau said. "We use treatment and accountability, and prior attempts have not combined the two."

Drug courts are one of the critical pieces of a package lawmakers put together in December to respond to the state's opioid addiction crisis that claimed 430 lives last year and more than 100 people this year.

The grants are intended to encourage counties to invest in drug courts to stem the tide of addiction, reduce crime and offset the cost of incarcerating offenders for years.

Manchester is often called ground zero in the battle against opioids in New Hampshire, but Hillsborough County Superior Court North does not have a drug court while Hillsborough County Superior Court South in Nashua does.

Manchester Mayor Ted Gatsas pushed the Hillsborough County delegation to provide money for a drug court in Manchester but was turned down.

The bill has a provision to allow Manchester quick access to grant money to begin a drug court in the city as soon as possible if the county delegation approves.

The Senate has already passed SB 464 and the House has given the bill initial approval, but the Finance Committee review is necessary before the House votes on final approval.

A final House vote is expected early next month.

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