

# Drug Court: Making a difference

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Billy Bennett wasn't really sold on the value of a program that would redirect drug-related offenders from jail into rehabilitation. After eight years of seeing dramatic changes in many lives, the 12th Judicial District judge is a believer.

Drug Court is a specialized court, funded by the Louisiana Supreme Court, and incorporates a team of officials and therapists to provide support to those who have been arrested for drug-related offenses and agreed to abide by the strict requirements of a "second-chance" program instead of going to jail.

"The district attorney screens those eligible for the program and recommends those he believes will benefit from it," Bennett said. The Drug Court team then evaluates the prospective participant.

To be eligible, the person "must have a non-violent drug-related charge pending before the court, be dependent on drugs and want to recover," Bennett said.

Drug dealers are not allowed in the program.

Bennett said Norma Lemoine, a judicial administrator and probation officer, brought the idea to him in 2005, but he resisted the idea until finally deciding to give the program a try in 2007. Lemoine is now the coordinator and fiscal officer for Drug Court.

District Attorney Charles Riddle said Drug Court was something he had wanted in the parish for several years.

"It allows the district attorney to divert cases to Drug Court. They plead guilty, but action on the plea is deferred."

"If they successfully graduate the program, the charge is dismissed and they have a 'not guilty' decision on their record," Bennett said.

If they quit the program or are unable to meet the stringent requirements, the case goes back to court and the person is sentenced for their crime.

Avoyelles is allotted 32-34 places for its Drug Court by the Supreme Court. However, the program tries to maintain about 35 participants and hopes to receive higher allotments from the state court in the future.

## ***Two-year program***

It is generally a two-year program, but some participants go through faster while others struggle more with their addictions and take longer to complete it.

"If they screw up, they get a sanction," Bennett said. Depending on the rules violation, that can be a few days in jail or doing community service.

The time in each phase is determined by "months they stay clean," the judge said. That means a failed drug test can send the person back to square one -- if it doesn't get them kicked out of the program completely.

“Each time they mess up on a rule, the penalty gets worse,” Bennett said. “Eventually, they can be expelled from the program for habitually violating the rules. If that happens, they go to jail for their original crime.”

Bennett said there are four phases of the program.

### ***Requirements***

Those in Phase I go to treatment three times a week and attend at least two outside meetings, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, each week. They are also subject to frequent random drug screens and must attend Drug Court at 8 a.m. every Tuesday to review their case and their progress in the program.

In addition to those requirements, participants pay \$100 per month to help support the program’s operating cost in Phase I. That cost is reduced to \$75 in Phase II and \$60 in Phase III.

As they progress through the program, the number of weekly treatment sessions is reduced. However, they still must attend the outside meetings, Drug Court and submit to random drug tests.

After finishing three phases, the participant has six months of “after-care” in which they are monitored to ensure they do not slip back into their former, destructive habits.

“Some fall off during after-care,” Bennett said. “When that happens, we consider putting them back in the program. While they are in the program, they have to maintain a job or be attending school.”

The Avoyelles Drug Court is used as a model for other parishes considering the program.

“We have an excellent team,” Bennett said. “Without a team effort, the program will not be successful.”

### ***Team members***

That team consists of Bennett, Riddle, Lemoine, public defender Keith Manuel, intake officer Joyce Corner, probation officer Ashley Weatherford and Pathways therapist Halette Spears.

Kathy Pflipsen of Pathways “was also a main cog in getting it started,” he said. Supreme Court Justice Jeannette Theriot Knoll “was also instrumental in getting it off the ground.” Dr. Bryan McCann also worked with the program for several years.

Lemoine said that as a probation officer she was aware of the drug problems in the parish and its significant role in crimes in Avoyelles.

“I thought it would be a good way to keep the recidivism rate down and give them a better chance to improve their lives,” she said.

Lemoine said Bennett eventually agreed to the program.

“The Supreme Court says that if you save one out of 10 in your program, you’ve done well,” Lemoine said.

Riddle said the program’s success rate is “close to 50 percent.” He said some Drug Court graduates end up committing crimes again and go to jail. Others show up at Drug Court graduations to support those who are completing the program.

Lemoine said the program “can’t save them all, but at least we are giving them the opportunity.”

### ***Beneficial***

“This program is absolutely beneficial,” Bennett said. “Drugs hit every family.”

He said crime statistics estimate that more than 80 percent of crime is drug-related in some way.

“I have seen this program do wonders for people. It is so good for people who want to do well, keep working and stay with their family. But it’s hard.”

Riddle said Drug Court has helped to create an atmosphere to encourage others in the community to get involved in trying to help those who have made bad decisions in their lives but want to recover.

He said his “Saving Our Communities” initiative is based on that same principle of enlisting community partners in an effort to change lives rather than giving up on those who have committed crimes or fallen into substance addictions.

“I wish more people would get involved and attend Drug Court and see how it works,” he said. “This program helps to reduce our prison rate, reduce drug and alcohol problems and just generally helps the parish overall.”

“A lot of people don’t understand what Drug Court is about,” Lemoine said. “We tell them to give these men and women a chance. We tell employers that we make them take drug tests and we pay for those drug tests, so the business doesn’t have to. The drug tests we use even test for synthetics. Most of the money we receive goes to pay for drug tests.”

### ***At Drug Court***

During the Drug Court session just before Christmas, several of the participants expressed their intent to stay sober for the holidays.

“Holidays are a great time to be with family,” Bennett told those in the court. “But what’s the word to watch? Relapse.”

“This will be my first clean Christmas in 18 years,” Daniel said.

Daniel, who asked that his last name not be used, said he “made a couple of mistakes” and was facing criminal charges. He appreciates the opportunity to participate in a program “that will help my life instead of going to jail, which could mess up my life.”

He has been in the program for four months.

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