

Grant-Funded Program to Develop Treatment For Women's Prescription Drug Addictions

CLEARWATER – Following a recent award of \$900,000, a multi-agency coalition committed to addressing the skyrocketing substance abuse epidemic in Pinellas County will unite to combat the growing problem of prescription drug abuse. As the Sixth Judicial Circuit reconvenes in 2009, female Pinellas County Drug Court defendants will become the first participants in a challenging intensive outpatient treatment program.

Annually, for the next three years, 70 female drug court offenders will have the opportunity to participate in a nationally recognized treatment model to enhance a client's motivation for change. The grant – \$300,000 for each of the three years – is from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a federal regulatory agency that operates under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. To be managed by Pinellas County Drug Court, the program will feature court-supervised, comprehensive treatment for eligible non-violent felony offenders.

Why only women? The National Office of Drug Control Policy has reported that females are at particular risk for prescription drug abuse, with higher rates of abuse among teen girls, more emergency room visits among young women, and higher rates of treatment admissions for dependence on some prescription drugs among females. This disturbing new trend runs counter to traditional drug use patterns, where males have typically exceeded females.

Circuit Judge Dee Anna Farnell, beginning her third year of presiding in Pinellas Drug Court, said the need for new treatment methods has become apparent by the number of women who are being arrested or dying as a result of prescription drug abuse. "In just the past 60 days, at least five active drug court offenders have died from reckless abuse of prescribed drugs such as Oxycontin," she said.

According to a *St. Petersburg Times* special report (Feb. 17, 2008),

"Prescription painkillers and anti-anxiety drugs now kill about 500 people a year in the Tampa Bay area, triple the number killed by illegal drugs such as cocaine and heroine. The Florida Office of Drug Control reports that the problem is so severe in the Tampa Bay area that the number of deaths per capita is nearly 70% higher than the overall Florida rate. Police report a surge in prescription drug related crimes, including doctor shopping, prescription fraud and pharmacy robbery.



Judge Dee Anna Farnell

Judge Farnell advocates for a 21st century model of treatment courts. "In many cases, more than traditional Drug Court treatment is necessary," she says. "Emotional and mental problems are the underlying cause of the addiction, and we want to address these issues with a more comprehensive, evidence-based treatment."

The program will seek to match or surpass current Adult Drug Court success rates, which traditionally exceed statewide success rates. In the most recent fiscal year, 87% of Drug Court graduates remained arrest free one year after program completion.

Judge Farnell said she will encourage new female Drug Court clients to enter the new program if they are abusing prescription drugs, have mild to moderate mental health diagnoses, and are evaluated for intensive outpatient treatment.

Judge Farnell pointed out that “The project was developed with the ever-growing cooperation and consensus-building of the Pinellas County partnership that has made Drug Court a success.” Drug Court operates with input from team members representing the State Attorney, Public Defender, Department of Corrections and various substance abuse treatment providers.

Three vitally important agencies— Operation PAR, WestCare GulfCoast-Florida and the University of South Florida’s Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute (FMHI) – advocated for the treatment model that will focus on the client’s motivation for change and the enhancement of coping skills for dealing with traumas that the clients may face with abuse of prescription drugs. Judge Farnell said one goal of the program is to develop uniform Drug Court treatment and administrative procedures for dealing with prescription drug offenders. Other objectives include:

- 1) Increasing Pinellas Drug Court’s capacity to serve women in gender-specific, culturally-appropriate environments;
- 2) Utilizing a standardized screening assessment to accurately identify co-occurring disorders and trauma;
- 3) Putting evidence-based treatment into operation;
- 4) Screening for prescription drug abuse.

Participation in this – and all Drug Court programs – will be voluntary for defendants in pre-trial intervention, post-plea, and post-adjudication or probation violation stages of the court process. First-time, pre-trial defendants who enter Adult Drug Court may have charges against them dismissed after successful completion of the program. For defendants under supervision of the State Department of Corrections (post-plea drug court), successful completion results in a withhold of adjudication, and/or a reduced length of probation.

Like other Drug Court programs, the Collaborative treatment will involve monthly court appearances before Judge Farnell and weekly urinalysis screenings. Operation PAR will provide the treatment for North Pinellas residents who enter the program, and WestCare will be the provider for South Pinellas residents.

The 12-session program monitored under the guidance of FMHI is known as MET/CBT 12 for Motivational Enhancement Therapy/Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. It begins with an intensive assessment designed to determine individual needs and specific challenges unique to each client. At this point, counselors will also identify any history of mental health conditions or traumas that may need to be explored in treatment.

In addition to being given a chance to graduate from Drug Court and become productive, drug-free members of the community, the first participants will be challenged to generate an appropriate name for the program; something more representative than Pinellas County Adult Drug Court Collaborative.

Developing a group name will be part of their treatment, and Judge Farnell says, “We want them to come up with a name that represents the treatment. Something that is transformative and empowering.”