

New Court Program Offers Help To Parents With Drug Addictions

CLEARWATER – Up to an estimated 80 percent of parents facing loss of their children because of abuse or neglect have drug addiction problems. A new Sixth Judicial Circuit program – Dependency Drug Court – is designed to help some of those parents residing in Pasco and Pinellas counties overcome those addictions and reunify their families.

Similar to the highly successful Adult Drug Court, the new program provides frequent appearances before a judge, who monitors their progress. During the pilot phase of program, participation will be capped at 80 parents with at least one child under the age of 5 or the mother is pregnant.

Addiction is a frequent stumbling block for parents who must complete a case plan before being reunified with children who have been removed from their home. State law requires that parents complete the case management plans within one year or face termination of parental right proceedings, which means the children could be placed for adoption.

Chief Deputy Court Administrator Michelle Bourrie said financial problems and delays in getting evaluations done on time are the major reasons many parents are unable to complete the case plans in time to make their families whole. Dependency Drug Court – available on a voluntary basis



Chief Judge David A. Demers reviews case files for the first session of Dependency Drug Court with Unified Family Court Director Debra Leiman, left, and Dependency Drug Court Case Manager Gima Camerano.

through Unified Family Court Divisions in Clearwater, Dade City and New Port Richey – seeks to overcome these difficulties by promptly providing:

- Recurring appearances before the Dependency Court judge;
- Substance abuse treatment;
- Frequent, random testing for substance abuse.

Chief Judge David A. Demers, who is presiding over Dependency Drug Court in Clearwater, said the Court was able to start the program because County Commissions in Pasco and Pinellas counties “recognized the need to

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provide funds that give parents a special opportunity to confront the addictions that are destroying their lives and may ultimately take their children from them.”

In Pinellas, the commission has provided funds for treatment of Adult Drug Court clients since 2001, and this year the scope of that funding expanded to cover the costs of treatment for those in Dependency Drug Court. This is the first year Pasco has had a drug court, and the commission provided treatment funds for both programs.

Parents who are eligible and who opt to enter the Dependency Drug Court are ordered to complete an appropriate residential or outpatient treatment program. The court determines what program is appropriate.

The parents’ overall case plan adherence is monitored by case managers from the Safe Children Coalition (SCC), which is responsible for overseeing the care of “sheltered” children (those who have been removed from their parents’ custody because of abuse or neglect). The SCC representatives accompany the parents to their court appearances.

The court appearances come every two weeks at the beginning of treatment, but the judge has the option of decreasing the frequency as progress is noted. In addition to Judge Demers, Dependency Drug Court cases are heard by Circuit Judges Linda Babb (Dade City) and Chris

Helinger (New Port Richey). In Pinellas alone in 2005, the number of families working toward reunification with their children totaled approximately 3800, and the magistrate reviewing those cases estimated 80 percent involved drug addiction.

Judge Demers said “Dealing with addiction may well be the toughest part of the process in helping parents become more responsible and to restore the parent-child relationship. Too frequently, the result of parental addiction is the permanent dissolution of families through termination of parental rights proceedings.”

Termination of parental rights means more children in foster care, and agencies charged with finding temporary and permanent homes already are taxed beyond their resources. Ms. Bourrie said a lower incidence of parental rights terminations is a Dependency Drug Court objective. Other objectives include a lower incidence of drug-exposed newborns and a decrease in the average time it takes to reunify a family when reunification is in the best interest of the children.

Drug-free parents are in the best interest of the children, and parents can graduate from Dependency Drug Court by completing the required treatment program and demonstrating 90 post-treatment, drug-free days.