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Federal Grant to Help Pinellas Drug Court Assist Young Adults Who Abuse Prescription Medications

CLEARWATER –The Sixth Judicial Circuit will use almost \$1.3 million in grant money to fund a special Pinellas Drug court program aimed at helping young adult abusers of prescription drugs and patterned after a recently concluded three-year program that targeted females with prescription drug problems.

The new program for persons ages 18 to 26 – both male and female – and facing criminal charges for issues related to abuse of prescription drugs is expected to get its first clients early in 2013. The goal is to treat 185 substance abusers during the length of the grant, \$424,760 for each of the three years. The grant is from the U.S. Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) and the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA).

The successful application for the grant is the latest example of Drug Court success that results from the ever-growing cooperation and consensus-building in a Pinellas County partnership that functions with input from representatives of the State Attorney, Public Defender, Department of Corrections and various substance abuse treatment providers.

Pinellas Drug Court Director Nick Bridenback said that while some of the money will be used for funding a case manager who will oversee the progress of those in the program, the majority of the funds will go toward treatment and testing. Treatment and testing services will be provided by WestCare Florida of St. Petersburg and the Clearwater office of the Center for Rational Living.

The program is being modeled after the just-concluded successful and acclaimed *WeCan!* program for females. The new program – *YouCan* – will allow certain offenders to participate in a nationally recognized treatment model to enhance a client’s motivation for change. Managed by Pinellas County Drug Court, where Circuit Judge Dee Anna Farnell presides, the program will feature court-supervised, comprehensive treatment for eligible non-violent felony offenders.

During the three-year *WeCan!* Program, 109 women graduated from the program after successfully completing treatment, and 31 are still in the treatment process.

While a statewide, prescription database has reduced “doctor shopping” among drug sellers, Bridenback said, prescription drugs still rank as the major abused substance that lands people before Judge Farnell in Adult Drug Court.

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.

Chief Deputy Trial Courts Administrator Michelle Ardabilly, who coordinates the Circuit's grant applications, said the 18-26 age group was chosen as the target treatment sample after hearing concerns regarding a gap in services available to those young adults.

Following completion of the program for females, an evaluation by the University of South Florida Mental Health Institute (USFMHI) said the program "has excelled in its goals of enrolling and attempting to provide the necessary treatment for female prescription drug users . . . One of the most prominent accomplishments is the successful graduation of 71 participants within the *WeCan!* program. These participants successfully completed all the requirements and mandates of the court."

USFMHI, which will evaluate the *YouCan* program for SAMHSA, also noted "a significant decrease in the total number of participant arrests that occurred in the six months before program entry compared to the six months after program enrollment" in the program for females.

The *YouCan* program will involve clients in treatment plans similar to that utilized for *WeCan!* The treatment model focuses 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. Other features of the program include:

- 1) Utilizing a standardized screening assessment to accurately identify co-occurring disorders and traumas;
- 2) Putting evidence-based treatment into operation;
- 3) Weekly drug testing during treatment and then monthly testing for up to a year after treatment;
- 4) Treatment sessions three times a week the first three months of the program; then twice a week for three months;
- 5) A final phase of aftercare and relapse prevention that calls for follow-up at a minimum of two-week intervals for up to six months.