

Mississippi drug intervention courts reach milestone of 10,000 graduates

Special to Pelahatchie News

Drug intervention courts in Mississippi marked a milestone of 10,000 graduates in March 2023 after years of offering life-changing programs for people struggling with drug addiction.

"Intervention courts work to help participants succeed," said State Director of Intervention Courts Pam Holmes. "It takes teamwork. It takes a dedicated drug intervention court team working together and working with the community. It takes committed judges, coordinators, case managers and field officers."

The Legislature in recent years has given intervention courts additional resources to make a difference in the lives of people who struggle with addiction. The Legislature funded five pilot mental health courts which began operations this year. Those programs use a treatment approach in lieu of more traditional court procedures for non-violent offenders who have been screened and diagnosed with mental illnesses. The program includes screening, clinical assessment, education, referral for treatment, counseling and rehabilitative care, service coordination and case management.

Holmes said, "The Legislature recognizes the measurable value of drug intervention and now, mental health treatment courts and the role these courts play in saving lives in all counties throughout

the state. The 10,000 graduate milestone reinforces the ongoing legislative commitment to appropriate annual funds to financially support these court programs. The state's annual investment in drug intervention courts helps save the lives of participants in active addiction.

Participation in drug court and successful completion represents significant savings in the millions of dollars each year and is the return on investment the state seeks."

Intervention courts are an alternative to incarceration. Taxpayers get the benefit of not paying to incarcerate people who can in turn earn a living for themselves and support their families. Avoided incarceration costs for intervention court participants amounted to a savings of \$57.6 million during the 2022 fiscal year. Since FY 2006, intervention courts have saved Mississippi taxpayers more than \$1 billion. With requirements that participants pay all their fines and fees, intervention courts also return money to the counties. Total fines collected for FY2022 was \$1,387,715, and the total fees collected was \$1,832,758. The cost to society to care for each baby born to a drug-addicted mother is minimally \$750,000. Babies born drug-free saved

taxpayers an estimated \$701.25 million since 2006.

Intervention courts give offenders whose non-violent crimes are rooted in drug addiction an opportunity to put their lives in order and become productive and self-supporting. People who were alienated from their families often reunite with their loved ones. Some are able to regain custody of their children.

People who struggle with addiction receive access to a variety of resources to help them recover, including access to in-patient and out-patient treatment and counseling. The average participant will spend three years in the program. They are required to abstain from drug and alcohol use. If they don't comply, they will be imprisoned.

Intervention courts equip participants with job skills, education and life skills that will enable them to support themselves and their families. Participants are required to get and keep a job. Before participating in drug intervention court, many spent years focused only on getting their next drug fix. Intervention courts provide the framework of discipline to help participants learn to go to work, on time, every day.

Business and industry play a vital role

in the success of intervention programs when employers are willing to hire people who have made mistakes. Employers provide job skills and training and help instill a work ethic. Employers receive the benefit of workers who are under the supervision of a probation officer and are drug-tested as often as twice a week.

Intervention courts require participants to seek a high school equivalency degree if they dropped out of school. With the help and encouragement of intervention courts, 881 people have earned a high school equivalency degree, 774 attended vocational schools and 1,550 attended post-secondary schools since 2015.

Intervention court participants also are required to do community service. Their work ranges from picking up litter to helping at a local food pantry. The community benefits from their efforts. Participants who have gotten a second chance gain an understanding of the need to give back. Intervention court participants performed more than 21,000 hours of community service during FY 2022.

Mississippi's adult felony drug intervention courts had a recidivism rate of 2.9 percent, compared to a recidivism rate of 35.4 percent for people who go to prison and are released.

In addition to getting a second chance, many intervention court participants qualify to have their records expunged.



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