

Calgary drug court gets enthusiastic new champion

Robert Remington

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On the job just two weeks, the new chief executive of the Calgary Drug Treatment Court has already peed in a cup and passed with flying colours.

It's not that Diana Krecsy had to be drug tested. She wanted to. She asked one of the CDTC staff to perform an unannounced, random drug test on her to understand what the experience is like for clients.

"She had to watch me," said Krecsy. "It's totally invasive. You have no control over your privacy, which is rightly so in a drug court."

Krecsy, the former chief executive of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Alberta, N.W.T. and Nunavut, relates the story to show that drug court is not a getout-of-jail-free card.

Non-violent offenders convicted of drug offences are eligible to enter drug court treatment programs in lieu of incarceration and, if successful, can receive a suspended sentence or have charges withdrawn. Yet, this is no cushy, "hug-a-thug" program. Participants must regularly appear before a judge who reviews their progress, attend school or take other training and undergo counselling. And, they must agree to submit to random drug testing.

"Over and over, we put them through this and they do not have the right to refuse," Krecsy says. "It is not a picnic. It is not a 'soft court.' It is more intensive than sitting in a jail cell. They have to work to be accountable. They have to come to court on a regular basis. They face their demons."

Krecsy notes the 18 months it takes to go through the drug court program is often longer than the jail sentence most offenders would receive.

Drug courts are proven to be a cost-effective alternative to incarceration, yet they are woefully underfunded.

"Our funding is abysmal," Krecsy says bluntly.

It costs about twice as much to keep a person in jail than to put them through a drug treatment court program, and that's not even taking into account the savings to the health care and justice systems. A costbenefit analysis of Canadian drug treatment courts in 2007 showed the taxpayer actually saves up to \$5 for every \$1 spent on funding a drug treatment court, when health and social costs are factored in. Last year, the Calgary drug court was estimated to have saved the system \$12.8 million since its inception in 2007.

Despite these figures, the Calgary drug court operates on a budget of less than \$500,000 annually. Krecsy says it could easily use double that amount.

Unlike Canada's six original drug courts (in Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Ottawa and Regina), Calgary and four other latecomers receive no federal help. The Calgary court relies on the city and province for funds.

Because it is a non-profit organization, Krecsy wants to start appealing to private donors.

Krecsy is a trained nurse with a master's degree in education. She won a Premier's Award of Excellence in 2009 for helping establish a provincial stroke strategy. When she left the Heart and Stroke Foundation to work with drug addicts, a few eyebrows were raised.

"I had people ask me why somebody with my expertise and experience would go to a drug court. It's because this is a group of marginalized people who need a champion. Drug court is economic and it makes sense on so many levels. Mental health and addiction have a stigma that we need to break down."

The majority of drug court clients are between 20 and 30 who have lost jobs, homes and families because of addiction. If drug court can turn their lives around, society benefits, Krecsy says.

When asked, Krecsy didn't offer an opinion on the Harper government's tough-on-crime agenda, other than to say, "Drug courts ARE tough on crime. They work."

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