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Drug court provides way out

But it's no easy out: It's 'more demanding than being in prison'

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Winnipeg Drug Treatment Court offenders work on beating their addictions with help from rehabilitation counsellors like Michael Anderson and Janelle Korosil. (JOHN WOODS / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS ARCHIVES) [Photo Store](#)

It's a sound not often heard in a courtroom -- the soft smatterings of applause.

But on a recent Tuesday afternoon, a wave of clapping washed over a third-floor courtroom filled with former drug addicts looking to change their lives and avoid jail time, and cheering on one of their own.

What happens in the Winnipeg Drug Treatment Court (WDTTC) doesn't often hit the headlines, but people who work with the program say the approach works.

That means when offenders stand in court before provincial court Judge John Guy, he's likely to offer them words of encouragement for hitting their milestones, or publicly chide those who need a push.

Some even get applause for particularly meaningful steps.

The court is designed for people who have been selling drugs or committing other crimes to support their habits but who want to change their lives. A recent program evaluation co-authored by the head of the University of Winnipeg's criminal justice department found the recidivism rate of 44 "graduates" of the court was 11.4 per cent, significantly better than the rate for Manitoban offenders on probation (28 per cent), under conditional sentences (32 per cent) or placed in provincial custody (66 per cent).

"(It's) a process of therapeutic justice, where... we put together plans and treatment to keep (drug offenders) in the community, and get them out of the drug life, and provide them with the guidance to live a normal and productive life," said Wayne Lloyd, the WDTTC's program manager. "Once you clean them up, you take an awful lot of crime off the streets."

Being part of the WDTTC entails weekly court attendance, clean drug tests and regularly going to individual and group programming.

If people can't meet the requirements, they're "discharged" -- or kicked out -- of the WDTTC.

About 110 people had been admitted as of December 2010, and 43 had "graduated" from the program, Lloyd said. In exchange for pleading guilty to charges and completing the program, their "sentence is generally one that's far more lenient than what they would normally get," Lloyd said. "Generally, people coming to us are looking at a period of custody, and if they complete the program,

generally they'll end up with a period of supervised probation, usually in the range of one year to two years."

It also rewards participants for progress with treats like vouchers for coffee shops or movie theatres.

The model Lloyd calls "therapeutic justice" has earned recognition. In June, the province announced a special court for people with mental illnesses. The court will focus on those who commit non-violent crimes, and launch this winter under Guy's leadership.

Michael Anderson, a WDTC rehabilitation counsellor, said the biggest misconception he runs into is the court provides "easy option."

"(The misconception is) that people will run to drug court if they know about it simply because at least they don't have to suffer being in prison," Anderson said.

In fact, being part of the drug court is "much more demanding than being in prison," he said.

A recent WDTC program evaluation found people in the drug court are about 30 years old, and 53 per cent are facing charges for drug trafficking. The report says another 11 per cent are facing charges for other crimes, such as robberies and break-ins.

Lloyd said cases where people are facing charges involving threats of violence are treated carefully.

Under the federal Criminal Code, robbery can be considered a violent crime, because it means physical violence or the threat of violence was used in committing a theft.

"The robbery cannot involve any overt acts of violence. So somebody that walks in and says 'Give me your money,' that has no real overtones of violence. So those types of people have been admitted," he said. "We're very, very concerned about violence. People are screened out because of violence in their past."

The recent program evaluation says cocaine is the main drug of choice for those in the program, at 60 per cent, and crystal meth comes second, at 17 per cent.

Michael Weinrath, head of the University of Winnipeg's department of criminal justice, said the program accepts a majority of "offenders with serious problems and fair-sized records," compared with programs that select "light-weight people who'd end up on probation."

"The drug court, it's a pretty onerous program. Probation is pretty easy compared to drug court; you just report to a probation officer," said Weinrath, who co-authored the drug-court evaluation.

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Typical clients

WHAT does a drug-court client look like?

60 per cent are male

They're an average of 30 years old

48.6 per cent are aboriginal, and 49.3 per cent are white

Typical charge is drug trafficking (53 per cent), followed by robberies and break-ins (11 per cent each)

Primary drug of choice is cocaine (60 per cent)

-- Source: Winnipeg Drug Treatment Court 2010-2011 program evaluation, Michael Weinrath and Sarah Lumsden, University of Winnipeg

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