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Future of drug court cloudy

Federal funding for Winnipeg treatment program has yet to be renewed

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Addicted to crack and living on the street, Glen Colton knew his life could go one of two ways.

“I was lucky it took me to jail rather than the cemetery,” Colton, 31, said in a recent interview. “When I was arrested I was almost relieved. I got a couple of good nights sleep and that really opened my eyes.”

It was in jail in 2007, charged with possession of crack for the purpose of trafficking, when Colton made a choice that finally set him on the road to a new life of sobriety and promise. Colton agreed to participate in the Winnipeg Drug Treatment Court program, a pilot project geared to steering drug addicts out of the justice system.

The program includes intensive counselling sessions and weekly court dates designed to encourage and support participants in their drive to recovery.

At his lowest point, Colton was living in his car, spending every cent he had to buy drugs.

“I’d show up at my mom’s house and she would lock the door and hide,” he said. “Nobody in my family wanted to talk to me. At one point my sister literally ran away from me.”

Since graduating from the program in 2008, Colton earned his high school diploma and is now enrolled in college, training to become an addictions counsellor.

“I never thought I would get my high school,” he said. “To go to college, I never thought that was an option ... It’s totally amazing. I love everything about it.”

A recent evaluation by the University of Winnipeg’s criminal justice department concluded the five-year-old program has “hit its stride” but still has room for improvement, particularly in its graduation rate, now sitting at 37%.

Supporters say the program’s future is under a cloud. The federal government provides \$516,000 in annual funding but has given no indication whether funding will be extended beyond March 2012.

“With no confirmation it will be extended we will have to stop taking new clients,” said program chairman Jeremy Akerstream.

Colton credits the program with changing his life.

“I would probably be in jail if not dead without this program,” he said. “I had done other programs before and they actually fuelled my rebellion into wanting to use more.”

Linda — not her real name — was addicted to crystal meth and selling the drug to support her habit when she was arrested in 2007.

“To be honest, I didn’t care about a jail sentence,” she said. “I didn’t think anyone would notice I was gone ... I didn’t see myself living much longer.”

Facing an almost certain jail sentence, she pleaded guilty to trafficking and enrolled in the drug treatment court program.

Linda said the drug court program gave her life structure and the support she needed to focus on her recovery.

“They allowed me to have my rent and bills paid ... I had a safe place to stay,” she said.

Linda has been drug free for over three years and now works as an administrative assistant. She says the drug treatment court program is money well spent.

“It costs a lot of money to keep people in jail,” she said. “If (the program) works, you are no longer spending money on keeping people locked up. We are talking about people who are sick and looking for help.”

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