

# Reflections on Presiding Over a Drug Court

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**P**erhaps there are many judges like me who are skeptical about the value of specialty or therapeutic courts. Today I am a believer. My conversion was borne out of tragedy. I have three sons now in their twenties. When they were children, we spent countless hours on the ball fields. It was a wholesome activity we shared with many other families in our community. One such family had two sons who played ball with my own. The parents of these boys were good friends of mine. The boys were good students, involved in sports and school activities.

We live in a rural area of the state. We have no gangs, and the crime rate is low. Unfortunately, illegal drugs are readily available. Although we live in a community of 15,000 people, we have had 15 young people die from drug overdoses in a three-year period. The two sons of my friends at ages 20 and 22 died within nine hours of each other from drug overdoses. It was heartbreaking to see the grief of these friends who lost their only children.

This tragedy had a great impact on me. As a municipal court judge, I deal with young people daily who have drug and alcohol problems. As I indicated, I was a skeptic. My philosophy is to make people accept responsibility for their criminal behavior. I did not perceive myself to be a social worker. Despite my reservations, I decided to try the drug court model as a way of dealing with young offenders with drug problems. I applied for a Byrne grant and received funding to hire the staff. My fear about becoming a social worker was unfounded. I have an important role on the drug court team, but I remain at all times in the role I am comfortable with—that of judge.

The personal rewards of this program far outweigh the time spent dealing with it. I had a surly young man in the program addicted to marijuana. He was intelligent but underachieving. He was only a

junior in high school. He was disrespectful to his teachers and was on the verge of flunking out. It was difficult at first, but we managed to keep him in school. He quit smoking marijuana, and the transformation in his demeanor was phenomenal. After he got clean he would light up the room with his smile. He stayed in school, made the honor roll, and graduated. Today he is going to college.

Another young man in the program was addicted to heroin. He is an extremely talented musician. He beat the addiction and is using his talents to help others find meaning in their lives. Yet another young man dropped out of high school. He could not get a regular job because he could never pass a drug test. Through regular drug testing, he was able to get clean. He obtained a GED and showed up one day at drug court beaming because he had gotten a job that actually paid benefits.

These vignettes are just examples of the elements of the program that make me feel good about our successes. Yes, we do have problems, and I do impose sanctions for violations. The most telling statistic is that not one of our “clients” has died or even had a health crisis in the program. Nearly all graduate successfully, and not a single one has reoffended for any reason.

Tragedy has visited my community, just I am certain it has yours. None of us can turn back the hands of time and undo these terrible events. However, we can do something positive to prevent them from happening again. The drug court is working in my community. If you have not considered it, you should. To do it well, we need resources. You will note in this publication that some of our funding sources are in danger of being eliminated (see page 7). Urge your representatives to make funds available for these programs. bm

## The President's FY2006 Budget, *continued*

new DNA initiative, which now contains money for training judges in handling capital cases, gets a \$60 million boost over last year. The Violence Against Women programs, such as the STOP grants, CASA, and CAPTA programs, pretty much stay at level funding, which is a good sign for them. Overall, in terms of the court-favorable programs, the emphasis is decidedly negative, especially when you take into account the Byrne/JAG cuts. Indeed, final budget numbers show that Department of Justice assistance funding is cut almost

in half. Overall assistance for DOJ is reduced by over \$1.3 billion from FY05 to FY06.

In terms of next steps, the House and Senate budget committees will soon begin working on resolutions outlining the overall parameters of the various sections of the federal budget. After that, the appropriators start filling out the blanks for the specific programs. For us, it is imperative to begin talking to our congressional representatives about the negative impact of some of the above cuts. bm