

Benton County Drug Treatment Court

No criminal justice improvement has multiplied as quickly in recent years as drug treatment courts. In the late 1980s, drug treatment courts were developed in response to the costly and time consuming method of dealing with non-violent, substance-abusing offenders that were overpowering the criminal justice system. Today, there are more than 1,500 drug treatment courts either in operation or in planning across the nation. Research praises drug treatment courts with reducing rates of drug use and re-arrest. The WCJC encourages and supports the Drug Treatment Court program.

What Are Drug Treatment Courts?

In contrast to the traditional “revolving door” method, drug treatment courts provide an effective solution to drugs and drug-related crime. A drug treatment court (DTC) handles cases involving substance-abusing offenders through supervision, drug testing, treatment services, immediate sanctions, and incentives. DTC programs bring the courts system, substance abuse treatment counselors, and probation officers together to help deal with a participant’s substance abuse problem.

Drug Treatment Courts Save Money!

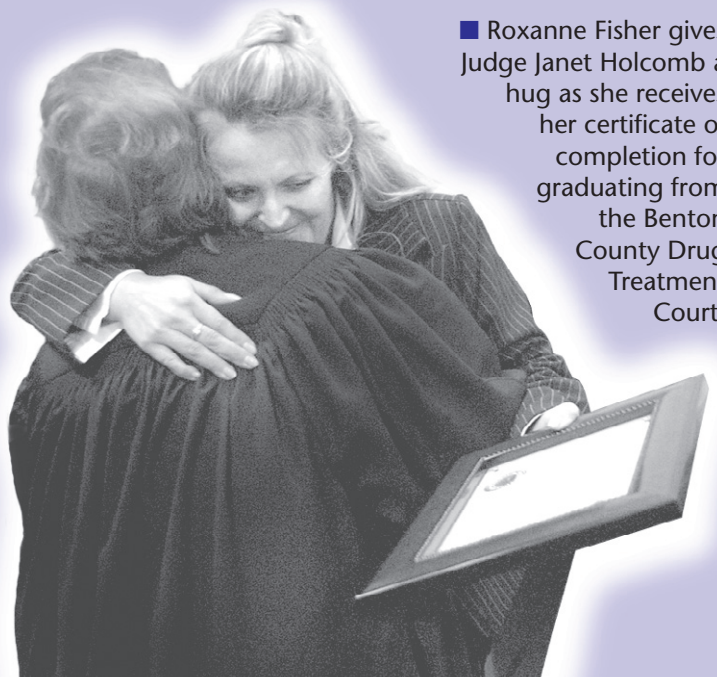
Incarcerating drug using offenders costs between \$20,000 and \$50,000 per person, per year. In contrast, a drug treatment court system typically costs between \$2,500 and \$4,000 annually for each offender. Evaluations from Oregon and Texas have shown that for every dollar invested in drug treatment court, ten dollars are saved by the corrections system.

Are Drug Treatment Courts Programs “Soft on Crime?”

Drug treatment courts across the nation control participants’ drug use and activity through intensive supervision, drug testing, judicial monitoring, and immediate sanctions that include jail terms when there is a program violation. This same population has historically not been motivated by the threat of incarceration alone. In reality, DTC participants find the treatment more challenging than jail or prison.

Overview of Benton County Drug Treatment Court

The Benton County Drug Treatment Court began as a pilot program in November 2001. Now



Roxanne Fisher gives Judge Janet Holcomb a hug as she receives her certificate of completion for graduating from the Benton County Drug Treatment Court.

— Photo by Tiffany Brown, Gazette-Times

fully operational, DTC cases are staffed each Wednesday morning and court proceedings are conducted in the afternoon. The public is welcome to attend Drug Treatment Court on Wednesdays at 4:00 p.m. in the Benton County Courthouse, Courtroom #2, 120 NW 4th Street.

Benton County DTC participants are people who have a significant history of alcohol and other drug use along with involvement in the criminal justice system. Many of the participants began their substance use and criminal activities in their teen years. Most participants have experienced multiple court interventions and/or alcohol and other drug treatment. DTC is often a

last chance intervention to help participants out of the cycle of substance abuse and criminal behavior.

To fund the program, the Oregon Judicial Department was awarded grant funds by the Bureau of Justice Affairs (BJA) and from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

(SAMHSA). The multi-year grant awards and in-kind support from community partners provide for implementing adult Drug Treatment Court program activities and participant treatment.

Judge Janet Schoenhard Holcomb speaks at local organizations such as Altrusa and Rotary Clubs informing community members about Drug Treatment Court and its life-changing potential.

For more information on Benton County DTC, please visit <http://www.ojd.state.or.us/ben/ben-drugcourt.htm>

LIVES CHANGED!

(As of December 2004; cumulative numbers since the program started in Nov 2001)

- 23 adult graduates
- Six drug-free babies born
- One parent who regained custody of child
- 100% obtained employment by graduation

WCJC as an Advocate for New Jail Facilities

Benton County has the smallest county jail in Oregon. Built in 1976 to house 27 prisoners, the jail now accommodates up to 40 prisoners by housing more than one prisoner in some cells — a practice that sometimes leads to trouble. When built, the jail was considered a temporary facility. Plans called for the State of Oregon to build and operate a system of regional jails. That never happened. The Sheriff’s Office, which operates the jail, was creative in developing alternatives to jail, but the County still needed to house 70 to 90 prisoners on any given day. Because there was no jail space, prisoners were regularly turned away when they arrived to serve their sentences. In addition, those serving time were frequently released early in order to admit another inmate whose crimes were either more recent or considered more serious.

As Benton County’s Local Public Safety Coordinating Council (LPSCC), the WCJC is legally required to regularly assess the County’s community corrections program (jail, probation and parole) and to recommend changes to the Benton County Board of Commissioners. The County has an extensive history of citizen involvement in community corrections. Long before Oregon required counties to have LPSCCs, Benton County had a corrections advisory committee of interested and knowledgeable citizens who made recommendations to the Sheriff and the Board of Commissioners.

In 1998, the Board of Commissioners charged the WCJC with overseeing the work of an appointed Corrections Task Force, composed entirely of local citizens, with no direct involvement with government. The Task Force members were to determine if additional correctional resources were necessary. They concluded that a new jail was needed.

Separate groups of citizens were convened to recommend the size and location of a jail. They estimated that a facility housing between 96 and 120 prisoners would meet current needs and provide for growth. If jail is to serve as a disincentive to those who commit crimes, there must be empty space to accommodate them when needed. In May 2000, the County placed on the ballot a bond issue to build a jail and a levy to operate it. Both measures, strongly supported by the WCJC and others, failed. Some voters thought the jail too big or too “fancy;” others thought it should be located elsewhere.

Frustrated but undaunted, the citizen groups, the Sheriff’s Office, the Board of Commissioners, and the WCJC supported an alternative measure: rent jail space in other counties. That levy, allowing the County to rent up to 40 spaces in other counties, passed in November 2000 and was renewed in 2004. While this is working, it is not a long-term solution. Space is available in other counties now, but there is no guarantee of affordable space in the future.

Transporting prisoners is an expensive, sometimes risky process. Housing them in other counties inhibits attorneys’ conversations with prisoners. Family visits are difficult and other counties do not necessarily have the same corrections programs as Benton County. Nearly all prisoners will be returned to Benton County once their sentence is served. The WCJC recognized that the long-term solution is for Benton County to have its own jail and members continue to work toward that goal. For more information, call the Benton County Board of Commissioners at 766-6800.