



County okays drug court, and study (01/04/2012)

By Sarah Squires

The Winona County Board ushered in a new criminal justice concept known as drug court Tuesday, with a vote approving allocating funds from the sheriff and county attorney budgets to help start the program.

Aimed at combating addiction as one of the root causes of some criminal offenses, drug courts have been shown to reduce recidivism through early, continuous and intense supervision.

Violent offenders aren't eligible, participants must plead guilty to their crimes, and may still have to complete prison time if they do not comply with the requirements of the program. Offenders are connected with a team that meets frequently, and together, custom tailored goals and requirements are met with incentives and punishments. The team meets with the offender frequently, checking drug tests and goals that could be things like going to school, keeping a job, or keeping a home suitable for children to live in. And, unlike the traditional criminal justice system, if an offender doesn't stay sober or misses a goal, the response is much more immediate -- often faced with a jail cell when drug tests show the participant has slipped back into the grip of addiction.

The alternative court system doesn't just tackle addiction, but also mental health and other issues. According to the Winona County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, near 75 percent of offenders in the county are struggling with issues of addiction or mental health problems.

"I think it's the kind of program that really can go a long way in solving the problems that are out there," said board member Jim Pomeroy. "I think the public benefit is really substantial."

Pulling funding from the 2012 budget from several sources, the board not only voted to move ahead with the drug court concept, but also to continue to fund the Rural Drug Crime program positions and to begin a pretrial services program. About \$30,000 would come from the the county attorney's office professional services fund, along with \$30,000 from the attorney forfeiture funds. About \$15,000 would come from the sheriff budget for contracted purchase services, a reduction in overtime, not filling a vacant position, moving dispatch personnel to 12-hour shifts and other reductions. Additionally, about \$60,000 in contingency funds are expected to be used.

Because of the various funding sources found for the new programs, the bottom line for the 2012 budget is not expected to change. Additionally, the county has been approved for a grant to provide training for the drug court program, and signs are positive that further grants for its implementation may be awarded.

The Rural Drug Crime grant, which will continue after the grant expires in March following the vote from the board Tuesday, funds several positions between the county attorney's office and sheriff's department, focused on combating rural drug crimes. County attorney Karin Sonneman said Tuesday that since the grant program began, Winona County has seen a "triple increase" in the number of drug cases it has investigated, representing a collaborative effort between departments. She said the added focus on rural drug crimes has also acted as a deterrent. "People know we're out there," she said.

Finding funds within various departments for the efforts is the result of collaboration and a move to re-prioritize programs and funds, said Sonneman. The programs, aimed at preventing recidivism, may also reduce the estimated \$250,000 in the budget for the costs of sending offenders to neighboring jail facilities when Winona County beds are full.

Outside firm to study Community Services

The board also approved an outside study of the Community Services Department with a 3-2 vote, with board members Marcia Ward and Wayne Valentine voting against the measure.

The \$14,500 contract with Springsted, Inc., will examine the consolidation of human services, community health services and veterans affairs into the "Community Services" department, highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the system, and provide recommendations for the future.

The human services component of the Community Services Department has been in the news of late, following an appeal from members of the Human Services Advisory Board, who approached the board about perceived grave staffing needs among social workers and other staff there. Concerns that reduced staffing levels in the department may have reached a tipping point that could put families and children in jeopardy were aired.

Following the comments made by the Advisory Board members, county commissioners spoke about contracting for such a study in order to evaluate the concerns of staffing and other changes in the department. County administrator Duane Hebert issued a memo to all county staff members following the discussion, suggesting that it was inappropriate for the Advisory Board to weigh in on staffing, management or personnel functions, and, that he had trouble dealing with the media on the issue.

On Tuesday, Ward said she couldn't support spending thousands for the review, as the county is in the processing of hiring a new administrator to oversee all Community Services functions. That position is expected to be shared with Fillmore County, and Ward said that both Fillmore County and the new administrator should be part of any department review. Additionally, Ward said that the Advisory Board should be briefed on the plans.

Ward, who has asked repeatedly for a county staff organizational chart to better oversee staffing changes, said she didn't even know how many people worked within the Community Services umbrella, adding she felt the study was putting the cart before the horse.

Board Chair Mena Kaehler said she disagreed, adding that this study could be similar to the one done on the county attorney's office prior to the Sonneman taking her post following the last election. That study, which examined a host of workplace complaints under the leadership of former county attorney Chuck MacLean, was said to be helpful to Sonneman as she took over the office.