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Cumberland County's drug court funding cut by North Carolina

By **Drew Brooks**
Staff writer

At the end of this month, Nicole Singletary will be out of a job because the General Assembly cut funding for her position as coordinator of Cumberland County's drug court.

The county's Drug Treatment Court also is in jeopardy. The court, created in 2004, is similar to Sobriety Court in that it uses drug treatment, education, intense monitoring and curfews in an effort to break the cycle of addiction for nonviolent drug offenders who are at risk of violating their probation.

Once the court loses its coordinator, it will operate in limbo until at least September Singletary said.

If outside funding can be found before then, the court will survive. If not, it, too, will fade from the halls of the Cumberland County Courthouse.

Singletary said the court has applied for a federal grant totaling \$200,000 a year for two years - enough to solve its budget woes for a while. Officials expect to hear whether they receive the grant this fall.

"We will make every effort to continue the program," Singletary said. "It's a very viable program, worthy of continuing."

Singletary coordinates among the many agencies and services whose cooperation makes the drug court - known as STARS, or Supervised Treatment and Rehabilitation Services - possible.

The agencies include the District Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, pretrial services, law enforcement, Cumberland County Mental Health, probation and treatment providers.

Singletary also supervises Kevin Hood, program coordinator for the Sobriety Court

Sobriety Court, in its first year of operation, is safe from the chopping block for now. It was created using a three-year grant from Cumberland County Mental Health and also receives funding from other agencies, including the Fayetteville Police Department.

But the more established drug treatment court no longer operates off grants and has lost its state funding as part of the General Assembly's budget cutting.

Gov. Bev Perdue vetoed the budget, but the legislature overrode her last week.

The possibility of losing the county's drug court first arose six to eight weeks ago, Singletary said.

At that time, the proposed state budget did not include funding for the 35 drug treatment courts across the state.

The state House later added funding, Singletary said, but the Senate removed it for good.

On June 1, she received her termination letter.

"We've known that funding may not happen," Singletary said. Efforts to find a grant to fund her position have been unsuccessful.

The day before Singletary's last one on the job, STARS will graduate its 50th participant since its creation in 2004.

The court had a graduation rate of 44 percent last year, according to a report by the state Administrative Office of the Courts. That was 4 percent higher than the state average. It takes between one and two years to graduate.

"I've seen a lot," Singletary said. "Individuals are getting clean and sober. They're able to get employed. Families are being reunited."

Singletary has other ways to measure the court's contributions to the community.

Thanks to STARS, she said, 10 children have been born drug-free, and participant have completed about 3,000 hours of community service.

"We have poured back into the community as a whole," Singletary said.

She says the court, which mixes treatment with the power of the judicial system, cannot be replaced by outside agencies.

Other treatments are a lot less structured, she said, and incarceration does not help people get clean and sober.

"I've seen the change in them, and I know the potential they have," Singletary said of the court's participants. "To see someone go through the program is a metamorphosis."

Although funding for Sobriety Court is secure for now, concern is growing over how it will be funded when the grant money runs out.

Sobriety Court already has grown beyond organizers' expectations, and grants that would have paid for two assistants to help manage that growth have fallen through in recent months.

As it stands now, Hood manages all 65 defendants on his own, outside the help he receives from Singletary on court dates.

"I work 24 hours a day on this job," said Hood, who keeps toothpaste and a trimmer in his desk drawer. "My job doesn't stop here. It's a 24-hour-a-day job, and it's only me."

But Hood finds the job rewarding, despite the long hours, and he wants to keep it beyond the next two years.

"It's a self-rewarding job," he said. "When someone leaves Sobriety Court, I actually miss some of them. It's a personal reward knowing that I'm accomplishing something, saving lives."

Hood hopes that Laura's Law - a new law requiring pretrial monitoring for people convicted of drunken driving who are charged again - may be an avenue to gain state funding in the future.

Sobriety Court, unlike other DWI courts in the state, deals with pretrial offenders, not just people on probation. Hood said it sounds as if the court could easily help apply Laura's Law to get funding.

But a newer bill, still in the General Assembly, would prevent that from happening.

Senate Bill 756 alters the law for bail and pretrial-release programs by, among other things, eliminating unsecured bonds.

As written, the bill also sets restrictions on funding for pretrial programs, stating that, "No state government funds shall be appropriated to or used for the support of a pretrial-release program or its activities."

The predicament isn't one that Hood wants to be in.

"Do we want to take the chance of letting them go without monitoring?" Hood said of the repeat offenders that are targeted by Sobriety Court. "We don't. That's negligence."

"If I don't have a job in two more years, then we're opening the floodgates for people to continue with their reckless behavior."

Across the state, drug treatment and DWI courts are scrambling to find new funding, Hood and Singletary said.

Fliers distributed by court officials tout drug courts as being scientifically proven to be better than jail or probation and treatment alone.

The fliers also applaud the courts for reducing crime and recidivism, saving money by keeping people out of prison and restoring families by breaking addictions.

Staff writer Drew Brooks can be reached at brooksd@fayobserver.com or 486-3567.

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- **Kevin Hood**, program coordinator for the county's Sobriety Court

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