



Everything New Orleans

## New Orleans' mental health court helps those who can't help themselves

Published: Monday, June 13, 2011, 8:00 AM Updated: Monday, June 13, 2011, 2:25 PM

By **John Simerman, The Times-Picayune**

Worn thin by major depression and not yet 21, Tiara Turner slept where she sat -- on a wooden bench in a darkened hallway inside the **Orleans Parish criminal courthouse**.



Times-Picayune archive

Her 11-month-old daughter, Navaeh, spread out on Turner's lap beneath her pregnant belly, while son Tyrell, 2, sat a few feet away gripping the spout of a plastic bottle in his teeth.

Down the hall in Judge Karen Herman's chambers, caseworkers and probation officers sat around a table with a view of the Superdome, getting briefed on Turner's troubles before seeing her in court.

A relative booted her from a Kenner house last week, and she appeared destined for a

shelter. An incident with Tyrell prompted a report to children's services. She had missed her latest clinic appointment, after pregnancy complications landed her in the hospital with no one else to handle her children.

"So the kids are running around in the hospital with her?" Herman asked.

One subject never came up: The cocaine charge that landed Turner here in the first place.

Welcome to mental health court, a program that was launched in New Orleans nearly a decade ago but faltered after Hurricane Katrina and lay dormant over the past few years for lack of funding until Herman revived it last month with a \$100,000 federal grant. The idea: devote "wraparound" resources -- housing, transportation, health care, treatment, counseling -- to mentally ill, nonviolent probationers instead of jail.

So far, the restart includes only six "clients" -- three men and three women who have taken convictions to be eligible to enter the program.

It's a long way from the 160 clients the program had at its pre-Katrina peak. Then-Judge Calvin Johnson launched the first mental health court in Louisiana in 2002, aimed at a population with deeper problems than drug court -- with its pass-or-fail benchmarks -- could effectively handle. Now, courts in at least 13 parishes in the state and hundreds across the country maintain similar programs.

### **More than drug testing**

What makes it work -- local clinics, treatment services, housing -- needed rebuilding, said Johnson, who now directs the Metropolitan Human Services District. The publicly funded agency provides services for addiction, mental health problems and developmental disabilities for Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes.



Steven Forster,  
Times-Picayune  
archive

Calvin Johnson

"There are lots of obstacles. The biggest one was the storm itself. It washed away treatment," Johnson said. The district is now applying for a \$400,000 federal grant aimed at setting up a more systematic way to screen people in need and link services through the municipal and criminal court systems.

Clients in mental health court often face addiction problems as well, and regular drug testing is part of it. But mental health court aims for more individualized attention, and greater leeway for lapses such as missed appointments or failed drug tests, said Peter Brandt, court services administrator for Orleans Parish.

Success also is harder to gauge.

"For some of them it might be little things, like get your ID so you can get food stamps. If we can help them be better citizens, take care of their affairs, make it to court. It's less rigid, more like skeleton requirements," Brandt said.

"It's being compliant with treatment. They have stable housing, they're connecting to resources, Medicaid, Medicare. They're taking their medications, in treatment. They're able to understand the nature of their illness," Johnson said. "The reality is, these clients, they never really graduate. They're always going to be in treatment because they're mentally ill."

Most of the new clients came from drug court, referred by judges or attorneys. Depression, schizophrenia, psychosis and bipolar disorder dominate the caseload. So do prior arrests for cocaine.

## **Constant requirements**

Outside recent court sessions, a few clients griped at the constant requirements: visits by probation officers to check on medications, illegal drugs and living conditions; weekly meetings with a caseworker; random drug tests; clinic visits. Reporting to court.

One complained loudly when a probation officer told her she needed to wean herself off a prescription narcotic.

"What, am I supposed to stop taking these drugs? With all these problems?"

Another wore a T-shirt reading: "I smile because you've all finally driven me crazy."

The trips to court by bus are what irk Turner.

"I'm ready to quit. I'm tired running uphill every day. I'm just tired of coming here to the courthouse," she said from the top step of the courthouse at Tulane and Broad. She described herself as suicidal, but said she went off her depression medication, Lexapro, for the health of the baby in her belly.

"At times, life gets so hard I'm ready to go," she said.

## **An obvious need**

Caseworker Gina Jackson, who has been known to pack food at her house for clients, said she sees early progress with Turner, despite the lapses.

"When she came to me she wasn't receiving any mental health services. She wasn't receiving food stamp assistance," Jackson said. "It's supposed to be a comprehensive service of care."

Absent those services, "She would probably be unsuccessful in drug court, probably be sanctioned a lot, in and out of jail," Jackson said.

It's uncertain how many arrestees might qualify for mental health court. The program now works only with referrals, with no outreach for a more comprehensive screening of new inmates. But Herman called the program "an obvious need."

Despite limited funding, Herman expects enrollment to grow fast.

"We'll just deal with the caseload as it comes," she said. "We're the court of last resort. They're bottom of the barrel. It's hard because they're taking a felony conviction, but it might be the best thing for them."

*John Simerman can be reached at [jsimerman@timespicayune.com](mailto:jsimerman@timespicayune.com) or 504.826.3330.*

© 2011 NOLA.com. All rights reserved.