

Welcome return of Denver's drug court

The program was created in 1994, one of the first of its kind in the nation. After federal funding expired in 2002, it was scaled back considerably.

By The Denver Post Editorial Board

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Denver's drug court is back after an unfortunate five-year absence. Coloradans appalled by the toll drug abuse takes upon our society should welcome the return of this proven blend of tough love and closely monitored treatment programs.

Denver created one of the nation's first drug courts in 1994 under the leadership of former District Attorney Bill Ritter and District Judge William Meyer. Its "carrot and stick" approach begins with careful screening. Would-be participants must face only a drug charge and have no prior violent felonies. If they meet that standard, addicts then get a chance to stay out of jail in return for living in a fish bowl.

Defendants typically plead guilty in exchange for either deferred judgments or probation. In either case, they are required to successfully participate in treatment as a condition of staying out of jail. The treatment is coupled with frequent drug testing and repeated appearances before the drug court judge to review the results of the tests and the progress of the treatment. Missed drug tests, positive tests or other failures of treatment can be punished by revocation of bond, short jail sentences, stricter monitoring or prison for repeated failures.

For eight years, the drug court turned in far better results than either voluntary treatment or prison alone. But the drug court was scaled back in 2002 as a result of state budget cuts. The drug cases were then dispersed among seven criminal judges. The Post and other supporters of the drug court including then-Mayor Wellington Webb worried the dispersal would undercut the close supervision by an experienced judge that makes this program work. That's just what happened.

When Ritter left office in 2004, all three candidates to succeed him, Mitch Morrissey, Beth McCann and John Walsh, pledged to restore the drug court. Morrissey, the winner, worked with the Denver City Council, Mayor John Hickenlooper and the courts to bring the program back. Now, Denver has agreed to provide \$1.2 million to restore a free-standing drug court in the city. It will be a sound investment. In return, Denver expects to reduce its current jail overcrowding problem by speeding up the handling of drug offenders.

We commend everyone who helped bring this vital tool in the war on drugs. Turning addicts into productive citizens not only saves taxpayers money and reduces crime in the long run, it also reflects our culture's most humane values.