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Drug court gets new life

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A "graduate" of Denver's drug court - a revamped version of which started this month - says the program "made me realize that I wanted to live and not die."

Stephanie Browning, 30, a former crack cocaine addict, said Thursday that the special court "really made me take another look at my life. There is life without drugs."

Browning joined city officials Thursday at a news conference at the City & County Building where the new drug court was described as a way to reduce demand on the city's overcrowded jail and allow minor drug offenders to get into treatment quickly and efficiently.

Denver first launched a drug court in 1994, but the program was scaled back a few years ago as federal funding dwindled.

The new version - for which the city will provide \$1.2 million a year - targets lesser drug offenders who aren't dealers or violent, said Denver District Attorney Mitch Morrissey.

"This is a court where we are selecting ... people that have addictions - people that we can hopefully help get out of the criminal justice system," he said.

Those who go to drug court can begin treatment in three to five days, down from three to six weeks through a regular court, said Larry Naves, chief judge of the Denver District Court.

"We expect that there will be between 2,200 and 2,500 felony drug cases filed in the Denver District Court this year," Naves said. "That's about 40 percent of our caseload. ... We estimate that some 40 to 60 percent of those cases will (instead) go to drug court."

Once an offender is sentenced to drug court supervision, he or she is required to submit to random drug tests, attend treatment and regular court reviews, perform public service and pay fees and costs.

Those participating can graduate within nine months if they meet the conditions of their probation.

"We know that these (drug court) services are remarkably less expensive than sending people to jail and to prison and remarkably more successful at giving people a second chance," said Mayor John Hickenlooper.

"What we want people to know is that recovering from addiction and getting on with a productive life after a run-in with the law is not only possible but it happens every day. It happens to thousands of people a year."

Another drug-court graduate - 22-year-old Larry Flores, a former ecstasy and marijuana user - said the program "grabbed me from what I was doing ... all my life.

"It just helped me get back on track," he said. "I'm in school now, trying to get it right."

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