

denver & the west

New drug court aims to ease crowding

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Denver officials today will tout a new version of drug court with hopes of unclogging the city's jails and getting treatment to addicts.

The new program, expected to cost \$1.2 million annually, will speed up the sentencing of drug defendants, which currently can take up to six weeks, said Larry Naves, the chief judge of Denver's district court.

Details will be announced at a news conference today.

Naves said that under the new program, which started March 9, sentencing for those defendants could take place within three to five days.

The re-emergence of drug court is aimed at reducing crowding in Denver's two jails. Currently, the jails average up to 2,500 inmates on a given day, but they were built for 1,711 inmates, said division chief Gary Wilson of the Denver Sheriff's Department.

Officials hope the new drug court will move inmates out of the jails and get them into treatment programs that will help them break free from a life of crime, he added.

About 41 percent of felony cases in Denver involve defendants with drug issues, Wilson said.

In 1994, Denver started one of the first drug courts in the nation. Under that program, a single judge handled all drug cases. Low-level offenders avoided prison by enrolling in drug treatment.

The judge then used the threat of incarceration to encourage defendants to comply with drug-treatment plans.

In 2002, Denver judges scaled back the program, citing mushrooming case loads and a loss of federal funding.

The drug cases then were dispersed to seven criminal judges, with magistrates reviewing whether drug defendants were successfully completing drug treatment plans.

Naves said that the city has come up with the annual funding necessary to pay for three new prosecutors, public defenders and probationary resources to bulk up the drug court system.

Under the new system, prosecutors will review drug cases and divert those involving nonviolent, low-level offenders into drug court.

Three magistrates will handle the sentencing of those offenders and monitor their compliance with drug-treatment plans.

Denver Councilman Doug Linkhart said the city of Denver is providing the \$1.2 million that it will cost to run the new drug court annually.

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