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Liaison make systems work together in mental health court

By JOSEPH G. COTE Staff Writer



Staff photo by Bob Hammerstrom

With clients in two locations at the same time, mental health court liaison Scott Brennan talks on a cell phone while waiting for a case at Nashua District Court.

NASHUA – It's not that Scott Brennan knows how to work the system. It's that he knows how to make two systems work together like they should.

When someone – a police officer, lawyer, judge or anyone – thinks a person would qualify for the mental health court, they usually call Scott Brennan, the program's court liaison.

The mental health court is a collaboration between the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center at Community Council and Nashua District Court. It diverts people who commit relatively minor crimes away from jail and into treatment programs as long as their mental illness led them to their transgression.

Most of the program's clients are intercepted at court, so that's where Brennan is when the doors open at 8:15 a.m. There he meets with prosecutors and reviews the day's list of arraignments.

When someone with mental illness has run-ins with police or ends up in court, Brennan is often able to intervene on their behalf, direct them to resources like Southern New Hampshire Medical Center, Community Council or other mental health experts and schedule an evaluation for the mental health court.

"I connect people to area resources," Brennan said. "That's the key to this role, being connected to the community."

If someone qualifies for the program and wants to participate, Brennan starts by talking with doctors at the mental health center about that person's needs, and then, with prosecutors and defense attorneys to work out an alternative sentence.

Based on the individual's offense and criminal history, he or she is put into one of two tracts.

But Brennan does a lot more than wheel and deal in the courthouse hallways and conference rooms. He also manages several clients whose illness isn't severe enough to have a dedicated case manager.

And he's called a lot. Police in the area have his cell phone number, so the calls come in the early morning hours, Sundays, holidays, whenever. And when they do, the single dad sometimes has to bring his 10- and 8-year-old daughters to the courthouse or police stations, where bailiffs or dispatchers keep an eye on them.

One day recently, he was pulled over on Main Street in Nashua because an officer recognized his car and wanted to let him know a mental health court participant had been arrested the previous night.

"All of the officers know who are our clients," Brennan said. "The bail commissioners have my cell phone. The police department has my cell phone. The mentality is, we'll do whatever it takes for a client to succeed. You've got to be a bit of a car salesman, and you've got to be willing to go the extra mile."

Without him or someone like him, the new court would have had trouble getting off the ground.

"He's very valuable to the program," said Susan Mead, the mental health center's community educator and outreach coordinator. "The beauty of Scott is that he'll go the extra mile. He's lived here forever. He knows everyone. He thinks outside the box and finds ways to get things done. He's good at connecting the dots between the courts and our system. He knows how it works."

"He is key to the program," said Nashua District Court Judge James Leary.

"He's developed excellent relationships, and he can get things done. He not only understands the individuals we're dealing with in the court program, but he's aware of all the services available in the community."

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