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Nashua's mental health court give some another chance

By JOSEPH G. COTE Staff Writer

EDITOR'S NOTE: The mental health court in Nashua helps people suffering from mental illness avoid jail time when they get in trouble with the law. The success of the court depends on the people who run it and their connections with one another. This four-day series of stories looks at some of those people and their connections.

The name Henry is used as part of an agreement The Telegraph made to tell his story.



Bob Hammerstrom

Waiting in the lobby of Nashua District Court on May 20, mental health court liaison Scott Brennan talks with public defender Rebecca Green, left, and Lora O'Connor from Connections for Youth.

NASHUA – It is impossible to say what was going through Henry's head the afternoon of June 25, 2008. Even a year later, he can't explain it.

His erratic actions forced the evacuation of a neighborhood, but Henry said he does not remember anything except waking up in a Nashua Police Department holding cell.

Henry, a 27-year-old Nashua resident, armed himself in the midst of a booze- and anxiety-fueled breakdown, and managed to hold police at bay for two hours before surrendering and being charged with resisting detention.

Henry didn't do any jail time following the standoff and hopes the charges will be dismissed. That's a possibility because he enrolled in Community Connections Mental Health Court Project at Nashua District Court.

The mental health court is a diversion program that allows people who suffer from mental illness to avoid jail time, and sometimes a criminal record, if their illness directly leads to their infractions. In return, defendants are required to stay out of further trouble and stick to a counseling and rehabilitation program.

The hope is that the opportunity to get better, as opposed to going to jail or prison, will break the cycle of petty crime, jail, release and more petty crime. It is a cycle that costs taxpayers untold thousands of dollars a year.

"It doesn't help anybody. It's a needless diversion of resources," said Dr. Hisham Hafez, executive director of Greater Nashua Mental Health Center at Community Connections.

Mental health courts aren't unheard of, but Nashua's is one of just four in the state. It formed 2006, when experts from throughout the criminal justice system committed to a program that has built-in "sequential intercepts."

In a nutshell, that means there are multiple steps or filters built into the criminal justice system where people trained to spot signs of mental illness are equipped to contact their counterparts in the mental health treatment system.

"It works because all the agencies are involved," said Scott Brennan, Community Council's court liaison. "All of the officers on duty now know who our clients are. The bail commissioners have my cell phone. The police department has my cell phone."

For Henry, that intercept was a court bailiff who told him to call Brennan. Brennan was able to represent Henry at court hearings and facilitate a deal that kept him out of jail and put him into counseling and alcoholics anonymous meetings.

Growing up, Henry said he was shy and self-conscious. As a freshman at a large Boston university, the Brookline native began suffering from the effects of an anxiety disorder. It wasn't long before he realized how a few drinks greased the wheels of the college social scene, and in short order, he was an alcoholic.

Samuel Adams and Guinness became a "crutch" he used to overcome his anxiety, Henry said.

"It was just kind of a downward spiral," Henry said.

Midway through his first year at school, he began taking an anti-anxiety drugs, which helped, but didn't stop him from drinking. After graduating in 2004 with a degree in music and business, Henry and a friend moved into a Brookline apartment where they split a case of beer every day, he said.

Rock bottom for Henry came about a year ago when he turned a quiet Nashua neighborhood into a crime scene. It happened after he lost his job and a long-term girlfriend broke up with him but also after drinking, a lot.

"I felt like everything was coming down at once," he said.

Henry has been told what happened that day but has avoided newspaper stories about the incident and doesn't remember it at all. He does remember waking up in a holding cell though.

"I felt terrible," he said. "I didn't feel like I deserved the family I had."

Henry enrolled in the "track one" of the mental health court, meaning the charges against him were continued, and eventually scheduled to be dismissed. That means all parties, including a judge, agreed to delay Henry's trial provided he stuck to a contract that required him to attend AA meetings and stay out of further trouble.

The contracts are tailored to individuals and can include requirements to receive counseling and continue taking any prescribed medication.

The court also has a second track, usually taken by people with previous criminal records or more serious offenses, in which he or she pleads guilty, but his or her sentence is deferred pending the same conditions.

Since getting into the program, Henry said, he's had one relapse: a 24-ounce Samuel Adams after learning that a family pet had died. Outside of that, his life could scarcely be more different than a year ago.

He's living with his parents for now while he tries to save some money. He has two part-time jobs – repairing computers at an electronics store and teaching computer skills at an adult education center – and hopes to find full-time work soon, and then move into a place of his own.

Henry said without the mental health court and Brennan, he may have sought treatment, but he likely wouldn't have been able to rebuild his life to the extent he has. Instead, he would probably be "sitting behind bars unfortunately."

"It's embarrassing to think I was capable of losing it like that," Henry said. "It's certainly not something I want anyone to experience."

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