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Despite success, court funding hard to find

By JOSEPH G. COTE Staff Writer

NASHUA – Since it was founded in 2006, nearly 250 people have enrolled in the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center at Community Council mental health court at Nashua District Court. Exactly five of them have failed to complete the terms of their enrollment.

Administrators say the recidivism rate for program graduates is very low, but they can't prove it. Beyond those preliminary numbers, there's very little data about how the court has functioned, and how clients may have fared since graduating.

Part of Susan Stearns' job as Greater Nashua Mental Health Center at Community Council is to track down grants and other funding for the court. One thing she'd like to be able to pay for is an in-depth statistical analysis of the court's effectiveness as well as the fates of those who are diverted from court and or jail.

"There's a huge piece there and the money isn't there," Stearns said.

That's a familiar story for the court, which, while showing promising results so far, can't expand without outside funding.

"I think the first impediment is the funding," Stearns said. "I think the money is a huge thing. It's going to come down to donations and grants."

The court was established in 2006 with the help of a \$25,000 United Way Ventures grant and a \$2,500 New Hampshire Charitable Foundation grant. When those were spent about six months later, Community Council, a nonprofit, bit the bullet and started shelling out its own money for the program, Stearns said.

"It was showing huge potential and affecting people's lives," she said, adding the mental health center was paying for those successes out of its own limited resources. Stearns, along with Community Council's community educator and outreach coordinator Susan Mead and Nashua District Court Judge James Leary give a lot of credit to Community Council Executive Director Hisham Hafez and its board of directors for fronting the money for the program.

But since the initial funding, Stearns has tried, usually unsuccessfully, to secure several grants that would fund the program in a more sustainable way.

One of the problems with getting the money is the very success of the program itself.

Many organizations giving out grants are more interested in handing out money to new programs than they are for paying for continuing programs, Stearns said.

But even without stable funding, the court is looking to expand in a couple of ways.

One of the latest disappointments was the program again getting turned down for a Criminal Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Stearns applied for the grant several times, but this time, the application was on behalf of Hillsborough County, which Stearns said gave the application more weight, Mead said.

If it had been successful, it could have brought as much as \$200,000 over two years to increase the size of the Nashua court and expand it to Manchester and, eventually, countywide.

Scott Brennan, the program's court liaison, only spends one-quarter of his time working with mental health court clients. The grant would have made him a full-time mental health court employee and paid for another full-time liaison for the Manchester region, Stearns said.

The program did get about \$15,000 from Nashua's Community Development Block Grant to help fund a juvenile version of the program. Like the beginnings of the adult program, Community Council began paying for a juvenile court liaison earlier this year. The Nashua grant now helps pay for that position.

Stearns said it only makes sense to intervene at earlier ages since about half of mental health sufferers show symptoms by age 14 and three-quarters of them do so before age 24.

"There's clearly a correlation between mental illness and becoming involved in the juvenile justice system," she said. "And the earlier we intervene, the better outcomes we have."

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