

Catholic organizations passing the plate to sustain drug court

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It might not exactly be divine intervention, but it appears the Dubuque/Delaware County drug court program might receive the private funding it needs to continue for another year.

Deacon Bill Hickson, with the Dubuque Archdiocese Catholic Charities Jail and Prison Ministries program, confirmed that Catholic charities and area parishes will ask for donations to fund the specialized drug court program that will run out of federal funding on July 1.

"We are trying to buy the community some time so that officials can talk with our representatives and get funding reinstated, because this is a very important program," Hickson said. "It saves families."

The area drug court program had received state or federal grants since 2008, but the federal money runs out June 30, after the Iowa Department of Corrections decided against funding it.

The intensive program is designed for habitual, nonviolent drug offenders. Community-based treatment is combined with close judicial supervision as a way for high-risk drug users to avoid prison time and possibly erase the arrest from their permanent record. Participation is voluntary, and candidates are referred to the program. There are 10 drug courts operating in Iowa, including the Dubuque/Delaware County program. The local program and one in Black Hawk County were the only two that needed another funding source.

Hickson said priests at all of the Catholic parishes decided to support the effort by asking parishioners for free-will donations. Hickson said Catholic Charities also has reached out to Dubuque Area Congregations United, an interfaith group of Christians, Jews and Muslims.

"We can't continue to fund it year after year," Hickson said. "In the short term, I think we can."

In 2012, the Iowa Department of Corrections conducted a study of return on investment for adult correctional programs that found that for every \$1 spent on Iowa drug courts, the benefit returned was \$9.61. It costs more than \$30,000 annually to incarcerate one prisoner in Iowa.

After being informed of the lack of funding, local officials scrambled to find new money and are expected to make pitches to parishioners to explain the importance of the program

Hickson said each parish will start the collection on its own schedule. He said it might take through the end of July to collect the approximately \$45,000 needed to pay for the Substance Abuse Services Counseling that is still needed. Dubuque District Court Judge Michael Shubatt, who has served as judge for the local program since its inception, said the state public defender's office is expected to cover the more than \$15,000 legal representation portion of the program.

Shubatt told the TH earlier this month that he hoped to have an opportunity to talk with the Legislature and find out if there is funding available to keep the program long term. Private sources won't be there forever, he said.

"We are optimistic enough that we will continue beyond June 30," he said. "If we can't collect enough, then maybe we won't go for the full year."

Diane Thomas, executive director of the Substance Abuse Services Center in Dubuque and Manchester, said she is optimistic.

"There's a plan to raise some funding being conducted in the community," Thomas said. "I'm hopeful because it's a great program, and I don't want to see it go. We're going to hold on as long as we can, and we will see where it goes."