

Charity gives drug court reprieve

BY ALICIA YAGER TH STAFF WRITER * ALICIA.YAGER@WCINET.COM | Posted: Sunday, August 18, 2013 12:00 am

A program that gives drug offenders a second chance through community treatment programs is getting a second chance itself.

The Dubuque/Delaware County drug court, which ran out of its federal and state funding June 30, will be fully funded for the next fiscal year thanks to the efforts of the Dubuque Archdiocese Catholic Charities Jail and Prison Ministries program.

"We reached our goal of \$45,000 as of the end of July," said Deacon Bill Hickson, noting that \$10,000 of that was raised in a week following media coverage of the program's financial woes.

"People were very generous and recognized the importance of the program," he said.

The drug court, which started in 2008, is an intensive, specialized court program to help habitual, nonviolent drug offenders with community-based treatment options and close judicial supervision. The goal is a more cost-effective rehabilitation than serving prison time, and possibly erasing the arrest from the offender's permanent record. Participation by referred offenders is voluntary.

Because Catholic Charities met its fundraising goal on time, the drug court did not have to suspend its operations.

"Judge (Michael) Shubatt kept the regular Thursday sessions every week throughout June and July. He had enough commitment from the parishes ... he believed the funds would come through, and they did," Hickson said.

The local drug court received an initial federal grant to get established, but that expired June 30, and state funding was not available to compensate. The Dubuque/Delaware program is one of 10 operating in Iowa. Black Hawk County drug court also lost funding and has ceased meeting.

Since it began, the Dubuque/Delaware drug court has enrolled more than 60 people, with about a 64 percent retention rate.

According to a 2012 study by the Iowa Department of Corrections, 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.

"If we can avoid sending even a few people to prison, it's still a cost savings," Hickson said.

But the funding from Catholic Charities is only a temporary solution for the drug court's future.

"We wanted to buy the program enough time to approach our state legislators and the other officials in Des Moines to restore public funds," Hickson said.

Area state legislators already are responding.

State Rep. Pat Murphy, D-Dubuque, is sponsoring a bill that would set up funding for state drug courts as well as mental health courts.

"We need to address the mental health issue just like we do with drug abuse," he said, noting that mental illness and drug abuse can go hand in hand for some.

For both drug abuse and mental health issues, Murphy said that incarceration is an expensive and ineffective form of treatment. Along with saving money, drug and mental health courts can help ease the burden on the court system.

The only Iowa county with a mental health court is Woodbury County. Murphy said the bill would set up funds to expand mental health courts to other counties as well.

State Sen. Pam Jochum, D-Dubuque, said there is support on the Senate side for sustaining the drug courts as well. She said the Senate tried to get funding set up to support the drug courts, but it was dropped during budget negotiations.

"They've been proven to be very successful," she said. "They're far more effective than anything else we've tried before to address drug abuse in the state."