

Catholics taking lead in fight to save drug court

Private fundraising efforts underway

By Dan Russo
Witness Staff Writer

WATERLOO — Drug and mental health courts in Black Hawk County were eliminated June 30 as a result of what one local judge called “short sighted” government funding decisions. Catholics in Delaware and Dubuque Counties, are now banding together in an effort to save their own drug court, a program that saves lives as well as tax dollars, according to its passionate supporters.

Since the latter part of June, there have been special collections at area Catholic parishes as well as individual donations being directly sent to Catholic Charities of the Dubuque Archdiocese. As of July 9, Catholic Charities has received \$5,605. Special collections at parishes have raised another \$5,000, with only two reporting in so far. The ultimate goal is to raise \$45,000 by the end of July to temporarily cover the cost of providing drug treatment, counseling and administration for drug court. This would be added to \$15,000 already pledged by the state public defender’s office to cover the legal representation portion of the program. The total would allow the court to continue for the 2013-2014 fiscal year.



Deacon Bill Hickson

Drug courts operate in states nationwide. They are specifically designed for repeat offenders with drug addictions who are non-violent. Instead of being sent to jail, drug court participants are given the chance to participate in an 18 month program where they are required to attend counseling, obtain employment, pay restitution to victims and meet a series of other benchmarks before graduating.

While waiting to see how this unusual faith-based fundraising quest pans out, the Dubuque/Delaware drug court is still operating, but staff and current participants are in a sort of limbo.

“What we’re doing right now is hanging on by our fingernails,” said Diane Thomas, executive director of Substance Abuse Services Center (SASC), which provides counseling to the drug court’s participants. “I think (the participants) are struggling, because a lot of them have made deals with the county attorney that in lieu of going to prison, they’re going to be in drug court. There are all kinds of legal issues. What happens if that program no longer exists?”

Organizers hope the fundraising campaign will buy enough time for supporters to lobby legislators to find a permanent public funding stream by the 2014-2015 state budget.

“Drug court is a program much like what the U.S. Catholic bishops called for in 2000, when they encouraged new approaches to criminal justice that reject simplistic solutions and promote serious efforts toward crime prevention,” said Deacon Bill Hickson. “This is a restorative justice program with a proven track

record and should be given a chance to continue.”

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*Diane Thomas,
Substance Abuse Services
Center executive director*

Deacon Hickson, one of the leaders of the effort to save the drug court, is director of the Archdiocesan Jail and Prison Ministries Office, a division of Catholic Charities. The special courts in both Black Hawk, Dubuque, and Delaware Counties are part of the First Judicial District of Iowa’s Department of Corrections, which is based in Waterloo. Of the 10 drug courts in Iowa, only those in the first judicial district fell financially short this year. A federal grant that partially funded the Delaware/Dubuque and Black Hawk courts expired June 30. Instead of filling the gap, the first judicial district officials opted to ask legislators to fund another program. This effectively killed a drug and mental health court that had been operating in Black Hawk County since 2005, and left the Dubuque/Delaware court, in operation since 2008, in the predicament it now faces.

“To reduce funding (for drug courts) is short sighted,” said Judge Thomas Bower in a July 8 radio interview.

Bower, who served as the first judge for Black Hawk County’s drug and mental

health courts, appeared on Iowa Public Radio’s River to River on a broadcast discussing special courts in Iowa and their funding problems.

“(Drug court) is a challenging program and not everyone is successful, but for those who truly want to turn from lifelong addictions, it provides the tools and practice necessary for success, while keeping families together, spouses united and participants in the community as productive, wage-earning, tax-paying citizens,” said Deacon Hickson.

Since the drug court in Delaware and Dubuque Counties began in 2008, 60 people have been involved in the program. About a third have graduated, a third are still involved, and a third have washed out, according to Deacon Hickson.

That may not sound like a big impact until you consider the fact that it takes over \$30,000 a year to keep one person in prison in Iowa, compared to about \$60,000 to fund the entire court for Dubuque and Delaware Counties for a year. A 2012 Iowa Department of Corrections study found that, for every \$1 spent on Iowa drug courts, the benefit returned was \$9.61. Nationwide, 75 percent of drug court graduates remain arrest-free for at least two years after leaving the program, according to recent studies.

“We have very strong bipartisan and bicameral support for drug court,” said Rep. Todd Taylor (D-70), whose district includes Cedar Rapids and who is a ranking member of the Justice Systems Appropriations Committee.

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"We get a heck of a return on our investment for what we spend on drug court," said Rep. Taylor.

So why are drug courts in the first judicial district in financial trouble, given the evidence for their effectiveness?

When it became clear that the federal grant that partially supported the district's drug courts would expire in June 2013, department of corrections officials decided to prioritize another program this year when submitting their funding requests to legislators.

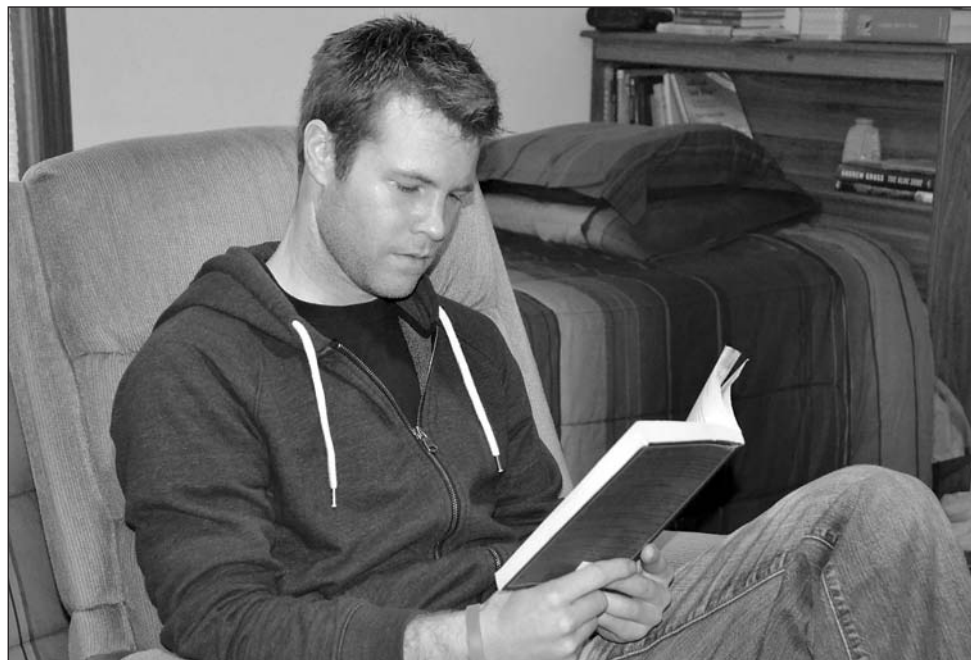
"The new money that we appropriated to the Waterloo area (first judicial district) this year was to fund the (Department of Corrections') top priority, which was to fund the women's resource center," said Rep. Taylor.

In 2010, the department started building the Waterloo Women's Center for Change, a multi-million dollar, state-of-the-art facility.

"I could not afford to leave this building unused with no funding for operations and maintenance..."

*Karen Herkelman,
First Judicial District Director,
on budget issues*

"(It) is a 45 bed facility and treatment center for women under the supervision of the Department of Correctional Services," said Karen Herkelman, director of the first judicial district. "The construction was completed in spring of 2011, but we had not yet received any funding to staff or operate the center. I could not afford to leave this building unused with no funding for operations and maintenance of the building."



Jack Ryan is one of about 60 people who have participated in the Dubuque and Delaware Counties drug court since the program started in 2008. There are currently about 20 participants, according to Deacon Bill Hickson. (Witness photo by Dan Russo)

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The department received about \$1.1 million this year to staff the Waterloo facility. In past years when state budgets were tight, Herkelman explained that the drug court programs were among those the department decided to fund with temporary federal grants, when "state funding was not adequate to support them." The first judicial district had \$328,000 in federal grants expire for the specialty courts recently, according to the director. Herkelman says she still supports the

drug courts, but says that some "big ticket" items took precedence in the most recent budget. She says she will continue to advocate for the courts.

"I do hope that we will be able to get the funding next year," said Herkelman

Rep. Taylor said he has asked legislators' staff in Des Moines to submit inquiries to all judicial district directors about drug court funding across Iowa and he expects a report to be completed sometime in August.

To donate to the effort to save the drug court for Delaware/Dubuque Counties, contact Catholic Charities of the Dubuque Archdiocese by visiting catholiccharitiesdubuque.org or by calling 1-800-772-2758.