

Articles

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Addicted, Neglectful Moms Offered Treatment, Custody

For many of the drug-dependent mothers who end up in D.C. Superior Court, charged with neglecting their children, the choices are rarely good.

Going into residential treatment might be their best hope for curing their destructive addictions, but it would often leave their children languishing for months in foster care, far from the one person they depend on.

A program launched yesterday by the D.C. courts and the city's social services agencies aims to give at least a few troubled mothers a better choice.

Instead of being forced to choose between treatment and their children, a few dozen mothers will enter a six-month drug rehabilitation program with their children, under the supervision of the District's new Family Treatment Court.

In a city with just 100 District-funded residential treatment slots for an estimated 60,000 addicts, the 18 beds that the new program will add will be precious.

By housing the children with their mothers and keeping them in the schools they were attending, officials hope to avoid the anxiety and depression that young children frequently feel when they are separated from the people and places they know best.

At the facility, the mothers will have help caring for the children but still will be expected to feed and dress them.

Anita Josey-Herring, the Family Court judge who will preside over Family Treatment Court, said she was skeptical about the proposal at first. "I actually had to be convinced that having kids accompany the parent into residential treatment was a good idea," she said.

The initiative, a pilot project, is modeled after efforts in Virginia, Florida and elsewhere. Seeing those programs at work persuaded Josey-Herring that they can give parents "an incentive to stop using drugs. They could see their child. They could hold their child."

Krista Evans, coordinator of women's programs at the city's Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration, said that children and their mothers typically benefit from the new setting.

"In most cases, it's a better environment, because it's highly structured and there's a lot of support," Evans said.

"The child was probably, in most cases, parenting themselves, and now, being in a safe environment, they are able to react as children," she said.

The District's child welfare system has long been criticized as among the country's most dysfunctional. For years, it has struggled, often unsuccessfully, to deal effectively with a large caseload.

With more than 2,000 neglect cases in the court system as of Jan. 1 and more than half of those affected by drug use, the Family Treatment Court for now will reach a small number of mothers. In all, 36 women will be chosen to participate, 18 of them in the next few days and 18 more six months from now, after the first group has completed its treatment program and moved into aftercare. Officials declined to say where the privately run residential facility will be located, saying they need to protect the privacy and ensure the safety of participants.

At the center of the new initiative is Family Court, created by Congress in 2001 after calls for reform. The court faces new local and federal mandates to resolve a child's fate in abuse and neglect cases within 18 months.

Josey-Herring said the Family Treatment Court will give judges an important tool. Finding stable, permanent homes for the children in these cases is the overriding goal, she and others said.

If a mother overcomes her drug habit, completes the program and demonstrates progress toward becoming a good parent, her chances of being reunited with her children are good. But a parent who fails to do so, in spite of the intensive support and supervision, risks having her child or children put up for adoption and other consequences.

"We're not guaranteeing that the children will be returned to the parents," Josey-Herring said. "What we're saying is: If you are successful, it enhances your chances. But it does not guarantee it."

The project, about a year in the planning, is a collaboration by D.C. Superior Court; the Department of Health; the deputy mayor for children, youth, families and elders; and the Child and Family Services Agency, which will foot the \$1.4 million bill for the treatment and supervision of participants.

Officials set up a plan to identify candidates for the program. Once a neglect case has been identified by a police officer or social worker, the city will conduct an initial screening to determine whether a mother and her children might be eligible.

Within a couple of days, a more exhaustive screening by social workers from the court and the Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration would take place.

A few days later, the candidate could be before Josey-Herring, who will make the final decision on who enters the program, which is voluntary and requires participants to sign a contract.

Not every drug-addicted mother will be a candidate. Only those accused of neglect are eligible; mothers accused of abuse will not participate. Mothers with severe psychiatric problems or histories of violent behavior also will be excluded.

Along with their drug treatment, the women will be counseled on education, health and nutrition, with yoga a planned part of the program.

While in the program, they will appear every two weeks before Josey-Herring for progress reports. "You're rebuilding people, essentially," she said. "You're helping them to understand that they are valuable and they have a life worth living."

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