

# Program marks 10 years of changing addicts' lives

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For a while, Wilbert Harris was a functioning addict. He served in the military for 12 years. When he came home, he had a variety of odd jobs, mostly in construction. But his affinity for alcohol, cocaine and heroin eventually landed him in jail.

He started spending time driving around with people who stole from such stores as Home Depot and Kmart, taking things as small as a bar of soap or as big as a television, which led to a conviction for petty larceny in Henrico County. His troubles worsened when he started failing court-ordered drug tests, violated his probation and ended up in a foot chase with Richmond police that led to a charge of cocaine possession.

“I don’t look at it as being arrested. I was rescued,” Harris said. “Because I wasn’t going to stop on my own.”

Harris, 52, was one of the first graduates of the Henrico Drug Court, a program that will mark its 10-year anniversary this month.



He graduated from the program in 2004. With his own determination to change and a lot of help, Harris got a big break that allowed him to start and keep a clean life: He was hired at Krispy Kreme. After seven years of making doughnuts, he now works as an environmental services supervisor at St. Mary’s Hospital.

“It’s been working wonders for me,” Harris said of the program, adding that he now has good relationships with his mother, daughter and grandchildren.

Harris is one of more than 300 people who have participated in the Drug Court since early 2003, according to the county. During that time, 122 people have graduated.

There are dozens of drug courts across Virginia, including adult programs in Richmond and Chesterfield County as well as a juvenile program in Hanover County, according to the Virginia Drug Court Association website.

In an interview, Henrico Circuit Judges Catherine Hammond and Gary A. Hicks said the program was designed to be an alternative to incarceration for people who kept showing up in circuit courts for violating probation.

“We were having lots and lots of cases every day of people violating because of drugs,” Hammond said.

The Drug Court is a voluntary program targeted at nonviolent offenders who have felony convictions, mostly grand larceny or drug offenses, and have trouble completing probation because of substance abuse and addiction.

Once a probation violator enters Drug Court, his or her sentence is suspended on the condition that they adhere to the 12- to 18-month program and its behavioral requirements.

Over the course of four phases, participants undergo drug and alcohol tests, group counseling, 12-step meetings and probation supervision in addition to regular court appearances.

The program aims to help people get jobs, open checking accounts, reunite with family members, pay child support and get off public assistance.

In short, it's supposed to help people become functioning, taxpaying members of society.

Participants are given incentives for good behavior, but such things as tardiness, dishonesty and failure to look for a job can bring sanctions, which include essays, community service, scolding from the judge and jail time.

On Friday, a few dozen people gathered in a Henrico courtroom for a Drug Court session. As Hammond went down a list of names, each person stood, walked to a lectern in front of the bench, and had a brief chat with the judge. Participants simply talked about their lives, giving updates on jobs, housing, children, education, transportation and sponsors.

"It's just a different approach with each individual," Hicks said, describing the process. "There's not a really cookie-cutter mode."

Most participants were announced Friday as being "clean, sober and compliant." Some received a round of applause and small rewards such as books, movie tickets and gift cards for hitting milestones in their sobriety.

But not everyone got good feedback.

One woman claimed she had gone to a hospital last weekend with a migraine caused by high blood pressure, but Hammond suspected the hospital visit was an attempt to acquire medication.

"You're still positive today for opiates, so you're going to have to go to jail until Monday," Hammond said before the woman was led away in tears.

Before each Drug Court session, all of the people involved in the process, including defense attorneys, prosecutors, counselors, probation officers, administrators and an investigator from the Sheriff's Office, meet with the presiding judge to go over the docket and give updates on each person's status.

"This is really a team effort," Hammond said. "All of these players have to be on board or we couldn't do it."

The court has about 60 people enrolled, and the judges said that is about as large as it can be before the groups start getting too big.

The program operates on a budget of about \$423,000 per year, said Drug Court Administrator Patricia Shaw. About \$232,000 comes from the state, roughly \$179,000 comes from the county and a little more than \$12,000 comes from fees paid by participants.

Shaw said the average annual costs for a Drug Court participant are significantly less than the costs of incarcerating a person for a year.

On Sept. 17, the Drug Court will hold a gala at the Henrico Theatre to mark the program's first 10 years.

Harris said he's looking forward to the celebration.

He said that without the structure and life lessons of the Drug Court, he would probably be dead or locked up.

"I don't know what God would have had in store for me," Harris said. "But he sent me that. And that was what I needed."

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