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Mental Health Court helps lighten the load

Alternative sentencing starts process

*By Howard McEwen
Enquirer contributor*

COVINGTON - Northern Kentucky Regional Mental Health Court is now in session.

Rather than going to jail, defendants suspected of having mental health problems will be offered the alternative sentencing program.

"Instead of just incarcerating these people, where they keep coming back to jail, where police officers have to deal with them, where the court personnel have to see them and the public defenders have to see them, we take them out of the criminal justice process and treat their illness and keep them out of the system," Boone District Judge Charles Moore said.

Pretrial Services will identify potential participants for the court within 12 hours of arrest.

Each individual who qualifies will be given the choice to get treatment or go to prison or jail.

The regional court - which serves Boone, Campbell and Kenton counties - has convened twice.

There are about 25 people referred to the program, Kenton Circuit Clerk John Middletown said. To participate in the mental health court, defendants must plead guilty and agree to have their sentences deferred. If they do not follow the program's guidelines, they could be ordered to serve their sentence.

Moore said individuals charged with crimes of violence and crimes involving a weapon are not eligible. The court will hear felony and misdemeanor offenses.

"The kind of crimes I'm seeing are theft and alcohol and drug related offenses," said Moore.

"In addition to the mental health issue, there is a concurrence of drug and alcohol problems. For example, if someone is charged with possession of marijuana, there may be mental illness issues. If we can solve the mental illness issues we can keep them off drugs."

Moore said that in addition to helping the mentally ill, there's a benefit to the public.

"Instead of these folks lingering in jail at whatever the cost of a jail bed and constantly being there, we take them out of jail," he said. "We take them out of the system so police aren't constantly being called to their residence. We don't tie up bailiffs and clerks to process them. The benefits would be substantial."

About 5 percent of the U.S. population has a serious mental illness, but a U.S. Department of Justice report states 16 percent of the nation's prison and jail population suffers from mental illness. And the mentally ill, on average, stay longer in jail.

In Orange County, Fla., the average inmate identified as having a mental illness stays 51 days, compared with an average stay of 26 days for all inmates.

According to the New York City Health and Hospitals Corp., the average length of stay in the New

York City jail system for inmates with mental illness is 215 days, compared with a 42-day average stay for all inmates.

Moore said a referral to mental health court may show up on a criminal history check but he hopes that does not stigmatize the individuals.

"To my way of thinking I would hope that prospective employers would be enlightened enough to recognize that these folks have sought the help they need," said Moore.

"What I'm trying to do is get them with the appropriate mental health care professional, get it treated and move on."

The idea for a court came from the Campbell County Criminal Justice Advisory Commission, originally formed to look at ways to reduce jail crowding.

Middleton said the program is a cooperative effort, funded through a grant administered through Northern Kentucky University. Moore volunteers his time for the program and Middleton provides a clerk to help administer it.

The court is the second mental health court in Kentucky. The other is in Jefferson County, the state's largest county.

Northern Kentucky's regional court has a similar caseload to Jefferson's. Cincinnati has had a mental health court for years.

Enquirer reporter Jim Hannah contributed to this report.
