

COUNTY, TRIBE LAUNCH DRUG COURT

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(Photo by STAR SILVA) The Boundary County Problem Solving Court team, from left: Boundary County Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Richard Stephens, Boundary County Prosecuting Attorney Jack Douglas, Kootenai Tribal Police Chief Joel Minor, Idaho Dept. of Corrections Probation and Parole Officer Ron Pell, Boundary County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Tevis Hull, Kootenai Tribal Judge Cindy Jordan, 1st District Judge Barbara Buchanan, 1st District Problem Solving Courts Manager Marilyn Miller, Counseling & Treatment Provider Chris Rawlings, and Boundary County Public Defender Serra Woods.

BONNERS FERRY — Boundary County officials, along with the Kootenai Tribe, launched Idaho's 28th Problem Solving 'Drug' Court last week with the hopes of changing the lives of drug-related offenders, their families, and the local community as a whole.

An invitational Drug Court session was held on Thursday, providing residents, along with city and county officials, an inside look at how the program works, and the opportunity to hear testimonials from current and former participants.

Ashley, who's been on the program since 2015, is due to graduate in May. Prior to the program being available in Boundary County, she had to commute to Sandpoint every day to check in with the court, however she says the program has changed her life.

"I started using meth when I was 14 and I will be 24 next week," Ashley explained to the court. "This is the longest I've been clean since then. It's been hard, but this program has saved my life and I am a new person because of it. I've been able to be home with my family and not in jail.

I've held a job, and the relationship with my parents has been restored. Before this program, I wasn't even allowed at my parents' house -- not even on the property, and today, I have a key to their house. I feel healthy and I do not have the desire to use drugs ever again. I believe this program can help anyone."

One only needs to review the Sheriff's Log and Court Reports to get an understanding of what local law enforcement and court officials battle with on a daily basis with regards to the growing drug problem in Boundary County. Counselors will testify that addictions often override the senses, and before long, may lead an abuser into a courtroom feeling helpless and wondering at what point the situation became so out of control.

County officials sought a solution to this dilemma with the understanding that local offenders, suffering from addictions, and finding themselves in legal predicaments, are our neighbors, spouses, and even children who are in need of serious intervention, tough love, and tools to overcome their problem. The intensive court-monitored treatment program is an alternative to the usual court adjudication process, and offers the offender of non-violent, drug related crimes the opportunity to participate in a stringent, 18-month rehabilitation process in lieu of serving a term of incarceration, which often times proves to be unsuccessful in deterring habitual offenders.

The Boundary County Problem Solving 'Drug' Court team strategically includes a representative from almost every agency an individual may have contact with, in the event of an arrest, from law enforcement, who makes the first contact, to the prosecutor, defense attorneys, judge, probation and/or parole officers and counselors.

Team members include: Boundary County Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Richard Stephens, Boundary County Prosecuting Attorney Jack Douglas, Kootenai Tribal Police Chief Joel Minor, Idaho Dept. of Corrections Probation and Parole Officer Ron Pell, Boundary County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Tevis Hull, Kootenai Tribal Judge Cindy Jordan, 1st District Judge Barbara Buchanan, 1st District Problem Solving Courts Manager Marilyn Miller, Counseling & Treatment Provider Chris Rawlings, and Boundary County Public Defender Serra Woods.

Officials believe the Drug Court program is key to changing the lives of not only offenders, but also the lives of their family members who have had to stand by and helplessly witness the downward spiral of a loved one. The program ultimately benefits Boundary County as a whole, as it is designed to free the offender from addiction and enable the individual to become a productive member of society, thereby reducing the criminal element from the community.

"Each case is reviewed by all of the team members prior to the regularly scheduled evaluations," Miller said. "The participant's success and/or failures are evaluated, in what area they may need additional support in, etc. We are all communicating and working as a team in order to give the person every tool available that can help them succeed in overcoming their situation."

Individuals on the programs are required to call in once per day, wear a GPS ankle monitoring bracelet, be prepared around the clock to take a drug/alcohol test, hold steady employment or be actively searching, and participate in intensive counseling sessions, to name a few requirements.

Participants are allowed to hold a special driver's license that allows them to drive only to and from work, and to counseling sessions, or court appearances. The vehicle is restricted by use of a breathalyzer device that requires the participant to blow into it in order to start the vehicle, and which also requires the operator to randomly stop and blow again, in order for the vehicle to become further operable.

"The participants are able to live with their families, hold employment, care for their children, and function in society on a daily basis, while experiencing a clean and sober life, but also learning to recognize and deal with triggers that are presented, rather than suddenly being released from incarceration, only to be confronted with a trigger and situation that they have not been given the tools to deal with."

The program is based on positive reinforcement and reward incentives. Individuals successfully completing phases of the program receive gifts and acknowledgments. If an individual has a setback into old behavior patterns, a sanction is handed out.

Jeremy has been on the program for about two weeks, and had a setback within the first few days, but because he brought it to the attention of the Drug Court team members, without having to be confronted, the members concluded that Jeremy's honesty showed personal growth, and, due to the fact that he had had no additional substance abuse violations, they handed down a mild sanction consisting of writing an essay explaining his triggers and how he would go about making better choices.

Jeremy accepted the sanction and responded positively to the assignment.

He says that he has learned to act upon the tools he has been provided with, and now it is automatic for him to bypass the alcohol section at the grocery store and head right for the soda pop.

"I know I needed help and it felt like I was in quicksand," Jeremy explained to the court. "But now I'm back on track, thanks to this program. This is the longest I've been sober in almost 25 years. It's been a long time since I woke up with a smile on my face. Even my co-workers see a difference, and have told me so. Sometimes I have a foggy head, but I can tell I'm getting better and better, and each day gets easier. I'm very grateful for this program and how it's changed my life in such a short time."

Drug court officials congratulated both participants for their progress and thanked them for their testimonies.

Caleb Perez, a former participant from Sandpoint, gave his testimony and said he is such a believer in the program that he is now working with the Drug Court by providing a peer support group for graduates in order to help each other stay on track, as they know it is a lifelong journey.