

The Telegraph

The Telegraph

NASHUA & REGION

www.nashuatelegraph.com • Newsroom: 603-594-1247

Tuesday, November 12, 2019 • Page A4

Mental Health Court making a difference

By ADAM URQUHART
Staff Writer

NASHUA – The city's Mental Health Court is working to reduce recidivism while also saving taxpayers' money by providing participants with an alternative to incarceration.

The Community Connections Mental Health Court in Nashua has been in existence since 2006. In that time, the Community Connections court liaison of Greater Nashua Mental Health Center (GNMHC) has served more

than 1,000 individuals. It is a collaborative initiative with GNMHC, Hillsborough County Court, local police departments, corrections personnel, consumer advocates, prosecutors and public defenders, with all parties working to help those suffering from various mental health conditions establish both short-term and long-term supports.

Officials estimate the program has saved Hillsborough County about \$2 million during

HEALTH | PAGE A5



Courtesy photo

Judge James Leary graduates a client from the Community Connections Mental Health Court in Nashua while Community Connections Court Liaison Mark Durso observes.

Health

Continued from PAGE A4

the time of its existence. New Hampshire has 10 mental health courts in total, although not every county features one of these programs.

"As we drew more clients into the program and started tracking data, we really understood not only are we seeing client outcomes, but we're saving taxpayers' dollars because we're not incarcerating individuals," Greater Nashua Mental Health Center Associate Director Jill O'Neill said.

She said recidivism rates fluctuate through the years, but the last time there was a check, the rate stood at 26%. This is well-below the national recidivism rate average of 67.5%, which is for those who have not participated in a program such as mental health court. When looking at the probation and parole figures, she said it also fluctuates at 50%.

When looking at mental health court, it holds the individual accountable for treatment and participation. O'Neill said naturally they are seeing that people do better because they need these sorts of community supports and in-home

supports. Additionally, participants benefit from supported employment, from the education and coping skills training offered through therapy or other programs.

"We know when someone comes through our door, or through a referral through court, that it's an individual and they have unique needs that we have to address for the person in front of us," O'Neill said. "I do think that's what separates us from the Drug Court, although the Drug Courts do that as well, but they have more structure in terms of what the treatment expectations are. Mental Health Court, we're really flexible to the individual."

From 2008 to September 2019, the program has served nearly 800 individual. Of this, 577 of them have successfully completed the program, while 70 participants remain active in the program.

Community Connections Court Liaison Mark Durso said that not all of the programs participants have previously served time behind bars, rather the goal is to prevent people from ending up behind bars in the first place. However, if folks are coming from jail, the program can provide assistance in reintegrating them.

"People who have charges, they're not there

because they have healthy thinking," Durso said. "There's a direct connection between your mental health, behavioral needs, psychological needs, just your needs to having these legal charges. People don't just randomly have legal charges."

He believes there is a strong connection to the legal system and the mental health system. He said absent these mental health difficulties, participants may never have found themselves in a legal situation. Durso said he had a phone call from an individual who is a doctor, and then got the same exact phone call from someone who is on Social Security, both of whom were dealing with the exact same issues.

"Mental health problems, legal challenges – they do not discriminate," O'Neill said.

Moreover, she said the most common mental health issue seen from people participating in the program is PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

"We have a high prevalence of individuals coming through that have been exposed to trauma through the course of their life or a significant traumatic event," O'Neill said.

Typically, mental health court is a 12-month program, although some

people complete it more quickly, while others are involved for more than a year.

"We're not going to stop. If New Hampshire doesn't have anything, we're going to lean on our partners in Massachusetts," O'Neill said. "It's about helping that client access the needs of that level of care they need."

As far as how the program benefits those who have graduated, she said participants can return to work, manage their mental health conditions, become better parents and act as productive members of their communities.

"I think that it gives people an opportunity to do things different than they traditionally were doing," Durso said. "It gets people connected to not only immediate supports, but long-term supports."

"People can change," O'Neill said. "Not everybody that's involved in the legal system is going to continue walking through those doors. They might, they might struggle for a few years to really start using their supports, but it's possible, and that's important for the public to know that."

Adam Urquhart may be contacted at 594-1206, or at aurquhart@nashuatelegraph.com.