

Note: This is an English-language translation of an article that ran in Al Dia. This article was the result of moderating an experts panel about "cheese" heroin for a group of parents and students. I met Judge Ashford at that event and they gave us unprecedented access. This successful program needs more play.

Juvenile Drug Court Provides Solution

Teens Leaving Abuse Behind

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Por SERGIO CHAPA / Al Día

Instead of enjoying their annual summer vacation in the mountains of Zacatecas, Adam and his family will spend most of their summer in a two-story office building off Interstate 35 and East Eighth Street.

The building is home to Dallas County's Juvenile Drug Court where officials run strict probation program created for first-time offenders arrested with less than a gram of marijuana, "cheese" heroin and other illegal drugs.

Since Juvenile Drug Court opened in February 2002, hundreds of area teenagers has managed to avoid juvenile jail and wiped their criminal records clean by completing drug rehabilitation programs ranging from three to six months long.

A Strict Second Parent

Each participant in the program is required to report to a caseworker, attend court, adhere to a 7 p.m. curfew, submit to frequent urine analysis tests, perform community service and receive counseling for drug abuse, family problems and stress management.

"It's like getting a another parent," Juvenile Drug Court Presiding Judge George E. Ashford III told a 15-year-old Irving boy who was admitted to the program last Tuesday for "cheese" heroin possession.

Adam, whose real name is being withheld, was also admitted for problems with "cheese". Al Día does not publish the names of minors accused of crimes but Juvenile Drug Court officials also asked the newspaper to maintain the anonymity of the children and their parents.

Adam said he and his cousin Lionel learned how to use "cheese" while attending the Village Fair Alternative Center. Both of them suffered overdoses from the deadly mix of black tar heroin and Tylenol PM in March.

They were hospitalized but Adam was admitted to rehab at the Phoenix House while Lionel received outpatient counseling through another program.



Adam was released from rehab on May 24 but upon his release, he has had to report to Juvenile Drug Court where he is required to report to a probation officer, appear in court, submit to urine analysis tests, complete 10 hours of community service, apply for a job and attend counseling classes at least three times a week.

Even though it's a lot of work, Adam said it was better than jail or death.

"Life gave me a second chance," he said.

His mother Romelia agreed. She remembers perfectly the day she arrived to help him after receiving a call that her son overdosed on "cheese".

The image of seeing him almost at death's door with pale, blue skin almost remains burned in her memory. He did not appear to be breathed and had to be revived by paramedics.



Although Adam's rehabilitation has cost the Mexican immigrant family their annual summer vacation to Zacatecas, Romelia said she does not mind taking him to drug court all summer as long as her son is healthy and happy.

"He didn't eat or sleep before, but not anymore," the mother said while watching her son waiting line for his urine analysis exam.

Families Together In Court

According to Judge Ashford, the program and parental involvement have contributed to a 78 percent success rate, one of the highest rates in the county's justice system.

Ashford said each participant passes through three stages before where they earn more and more trust before they are able to graduate from the program.

During the Tuesday afternoon hearings, all the children and their parents come to together, creating what Ashford believes to be an environment of family support where together they can see examples of success or punish those who fail their urine analysis tests or don't comply with other conditions set by the court.

With time, the court would like to partner with private business to offer prizes to teens that successfully complete the different stages of the program.

"So far it's been successful," Ashford said of the program. "Our numbers are much better. We have a have much lower percentage of new arrests and relapse."

Although the court originally handled marijuana cases, Ashford said they recently began to receive other drug cases, mostly "cheese" heroin.

"It's just evil to me," Ashford said about "cheese" and its dealers. "You can understand that it's just a business decision for a drug dealer to addict people so he can have customers but when you make it cheaper than marijuana and sell it to children as young as 10 or 12 years old, that's just sinister."

On Tuesday, Ashford said he had to call an ambulance for a 14-year-old boy from Pleasant Grove who was obviously high on "cheese" in the middle of a truancy court hearing that Ashford was conducting in the same building as Juvenile Drug Court.

“His brother died from cheese and he’s still hooked on cheese,” Ashford said. “He couldn’t even stay awaked for his own truancy hearing. That’s how bad it is.”

Ashford said most of the “cheese” heroin children enrolled in the program have their drug problem under control but those that need more help are sent to court-ordered rehabilitation programs or must attend a special school inside the Juvenile Drug Court building.

Pedro, the grandson of Rogelio and Rebecca Rodriguez, was caught with marijuana and ordered to attend the school where he was allowed to continue his normal high school studies but he had to submit to daily urine tests and counseling.



“It kept him from going to juvi and it’ll keep it off his record when he grows up,” Rebecca Rodriguez said of the experience.

Juvenile Drug Court Coordinator Maggie Williams said the program currently has 70 open cases and operates with an annual budget of \$240,000.

Help Needed in Spanish

Although the court would like to secure more funds to provide more services, Williams said the most pressing concern for the program is to hire a full-time bilingual caseworker.

The need was evident on Tuesday where nine out of 11 boys and one girl were Hispanic. Although some of their parents spoke English, others did not.

“I have an open position for a bilingual worker, but right now I have my secretary Imelda doing most of the translating,” Williams said. “Otherwise, the children translate for the parents but you can’t rely on that. They don’t always tell them the whole story or the truth.

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