

Our View: Glendale's mental health court a wise move

Mental illness is at the center of national conversations these days, and Glendale recently made a wise decision to address a need within the mental health community with the introduction of a specialized court, following the likes of Tempe and Phoenix.

Roughly 17 percent of people in prisons had mental health problems before their arrests, according to a 2009 guide from the Council of State Governments Justice Center.

Since the 1990s, municipalities across the country have tried to stem the tide of court cases and incarcerations involving people with mental illness with specialized mental health courts that connect defendants to needed treatment and supervision, rather than jail time.

Presiding Judge Elizabeth Finn said Glendale City Court first began considering adding a mental health court last year. Since then, Glendale has relied extensively on Tempe's knowledge and experience from its own program, which was established in 2003. The Glendale Mental Health Court reviewed its first set of cases Jan. 16.

Because of the newness of Glendale's court, Tempe can be used as an example for its possible future and success.

Tempe Municipal Court Presiding Judge MaryAnne Majestic said there was a definite need to address the amount of cases involving the mentally ill, especially those among the homeless population in Tempe.

"It sort of became a revolving door situation," she said. "We recognize that this was a problem and the traditional justice system was not addressing this."

Tempe considers its mental health court a point of pride, according to city spokeswoman Nikki Ripley. In Tempe's State of the Court 2012, the mental health court docket is described as "a model for addressing the seriously mentally ill population" for other municipalities, with the number of participants being at an "all-time high."

Those participants, who were booked into jail for misdemeanor crimes, are referred to the mental health court if they are Magellan of Arizona clients. Judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys then examine the cases and connect the defendants with treatment, tracking the defendants' progress for about six months.

Studies show participating defendants in mental health courts throughout the rest of the country are less likely to become repeat offenders or commit more serious crimes, and Majestic said that has been the case for Tempe.

There's virtually no downside to such a specialized court. Finn said many of the defendants' families are relieved to finally get their family member proper help. And without the need for costly psychiatric evaluations to determine competency, cities with mental health courts end up saving, which Glendale expects to do.

Majestic said Tempe's mental health court docket has helped the community as a whole. We believe Glendale's own court surely has a meaningful future ahead, if Tempe's success is any indication.

The Arizona Republic Editorial Board, West Valley

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