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Mental health court to offer pretrial diversion

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District Attorney Jimmie Harp and Circuit Judge Billy Ogletree say a new mental health court pretrial diversion program should save Etowah County taxpayers money while giving non-violent offenders a chance to straighten out their lives — with the threat of jail time if they flunk out of the program.

Ogletree and Harp will meet with CED Mental Health officials and community mental health and community service providers Tuesday at CED Mental Health in Attalla to finalize details for the program Ogletree said he plans to begin in August.

The program primarily will allow first-time, nonviolent offenders with underlying potential mental health issues to apply for the program with the assistance of their attorneys, according to Ogletree.

CED Mental Health will evaluate the applicants and provide its findings to the district attorney's office. It will forward that information to Ogletree, who will have final approval of those chosen for the program.

Ogletree said a guilty plea will be entered for those selected, but after restitution and court costs are paid and the program completed, the convictions will be removed from their records. If they don't comply with the program's rules, however, they will face jail time.

Harp said the county's drug court, a pretrial diversion program for drug-related offenses, has proven successful and has saved the state millions of dollars by not incarcerating offenders.

Adding the mental health component, he said, "is a good way to take some nonviolent offenders and get them back to being productive citizens without having to spend the thousands it cost to house them in the Etowah County Jail or in the prison system."

Harp said many drug offenders also have mental health issues that need to be addressed, and similar programs are operating successfully in other Alabama counties.

He noted that there isn't a "one size fits all" approach to the prosecution of crimes. "There's got to be innovative, outside the box programs in order to solve the crime problem," he said, "and locking away everyone and throwing away the key has certainly not been effective. It's done nothing but overcrowd prisons."

Ogletree said he hopes to have a special docket twice a month for mental health court. He expects there to be 25 to 35 people in the program at any one time.

Case managers from CED Mental Health will be involved to ensure those in the program are attending meetings, going to counseling, visiting their doctors and taking their medication, and that no other offenses have come up.

"What we are trying to do is get these people stabilized, get them on their medication, get them with their doctors, get them with their (psychologists), get them back on their feet and get them headed in the right direction so they won't re-offend," Ogletree said.



PUT AN END TO EXCUSES.

The goal, he said, is to treat the underlying source of the problems and reinforce positive behavior, in hopes the recidivism rate will decline and “we will have someone that can contribute to society, rather than continually draining society.” That will benefit the community, the offenders who receive health services and the taxpayers whose money will be saved.

Ogletree said local agencies such as the Salvation Army, churches and advocates for the homeless and those with mental health issue will need to be involved.

“It’s going to be a very hands-on approach,” Ogletree said. “It’s going to take a lot of hands-on time on my part and others’ part, it’s a special group. It’s exciting, because any time you can potentially help those that need help, and then in turn it will benefit our citizens ... in Etowah County, it’s a benefit to all.”

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