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King County court helps drug-addicted parents

By Cara Solomon
Seattle Times staff reporter

The court did not require her to be there. But Linda Garcia came anyway, her youngest child in hand. She wanted to be with the people who pushed her, and praised her, to the point where she now stood: a few days away from another chance.

"All the hard work we did together," said Garcia, who is recovering from a heroin addiction and caring again for her three children. "It finally happened."

A year ago, Garcia, 40, was the first person to enter King County's program for drug-addicted parents. This month, she came to Family Treatment Court, ready to move into a rented house in Bellevue, with a job lined up for September and meetings twice a week to support her sobriety.

What happened in between was messy — a mix of hard work and frustration for everyone. But this is how it goes in Family Treatment Court, an intense 18 months in which social workers, mental-health counselors and lawyers pull together as a team, with the judge acting as the leader.

The program is part of a recent movement toward problem-solving courts, with judges prescribing more support than punishment. There are more than 35 such county-level courts in the state, each addressing a deep-seated problem, from mental illness to drug addiction. In Family Treatment Court, the goal is to get parents ready to care for their children — or ready, in some cases, to let their children go.

"I've had them yell at me. I've had them curse me out," said Judge Patricia Clark, the founding judge in the King County court. "And then I've had them standing there in six weeks, crying, saying, 'Thank you.'"

A recent study of Pierce County's program found that nearly 85 percent of the parents who graduate are reunited with their children. The county created the program in 2001 to address its high rate of



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Rebecca Jones, 25, reacts with pleasure as she is congratulated on her progress and moved up to a higher level in a program in King County Family Treatment Court. With her is Ed Little, holding their 43-day-old son, Patrick. The program for parents with substance-abuse problems is funded with a two-year federal grant of \$450,000.



Linda Garcia, right, and her friend Stacy Caves wait with their children in the back of a courtroom at the Youth Service Center in Seattle. Garcia was the first person to enter the King County program.

terminating parental rights.

King County Family Treatment Court

Who's eligible: Parents with substance-abuse problems who are facing allegations of child abuse or neglect; parents must apply within six months of the state's removal of children from the home. Parents with convictions for violent crime, weapons or sex abuse are ineligible.

What's involved: Each parent works with a team of professionals toward sobriety and, if possible, the return of children to the home. Those professionals are the judge, the parent's lawyer, the child's lawyer, an assistant attorney general, a social worker with the state, a court-appointed special advocate, a mental-health case manager and the manager for Family Treatment Court.

In order to graduate, parents must: complete a substance-abuse treatment program. Consistently attend a sobriety-support program. Arrange for housing. Resolve outstanding warrants. Establish a support system. Plan for employment or education. Have children living at home for six months or in permanent placements elsewhere. Be clean for six consecutive months.

How to sign up: Call Kelly Warner-King, program manager, at 206-205-9340.

In King County, it took several years to set up Family Treatment Court, with lobbying by Clark and others who work in the foster-

care system. The program is funded with a two-year federal grant of \$450,000.

So far, the court has worked with 21 families, with mixed results. Five families have been reunited so far. Two have left the program. One parent was dismissed because she consistently refused to meet the requirements.

The rules of the court are rigid. In the beginning, parents are tested for drugs as often as three times a week. They are expected in court twice a month. They complete a rehabilitation program, followed by hundreds of hours of counseling, parenting classes and meetings focused on the future.

In return, the parents are treated to a court that knows their stories. They get applause for the number of months they have stayed sober. Sometimes, they get gifts, from bottles of bubble bath to a trip with

their children to the zoo.

Most important, they get help. The other day, Rebecca Jones, 25, came to court with a problem. Her newborn has a respiratory disorder, and the doctor recommended a cleaner, less-crowded home for mother and son.

It seemed like such a hurdle, to find housing all over again. But Jones' lawyer found a solution within minutes: He would send a state worker over to Jones' home to certify that the situation was, indeed, unhealthy. That would help the family move into safer housing.

But one dirty drug test, and a parent is sent right back to the beginning. It happened to Robyn Smotherman three months into the program. It felt like failure, losing all that credibility. Going back to supervised visits with her children. Writing some silly essay for the judge.

But she made it through to the other day in court, five months of sobriety behind her, her teenage son by her side. Judge Philip Hubbard praised the boy for his discipline in football, all that running up and down the stairs.

"Your honor, he lettered as a freshman," said Smotherman, 44, whose other two children remain in the state's custody. "It's a big deal."

As a new judge in this court, it is sometimes startling to Hubbard, the way the distance between him and the "offenders" has disappeared. He has spent most of his judicial career in more traditional courts. Now all of a sudden, he's a team player, swamped every day with e-mails and phone calls, telling him which parent has what problem, and why.

"With the kids, it seems easier," said Hubbard, reflecting on the supportive tone of juvenile drug court. "With older people, you really have to resist the urge to say: Just stop drinking."

Parents are expected to relapse at some point, said Kelly Warner-King, the program manager: For so many people, that's part of the process of recovery. The real questions are how quickly they can get back into rehabilitation and whether they can stay committed.

When a parent disappears from court, members of the team will knock on doors, drive around neighborhoods, call several times a week. Occasionally, the judge will issue arrest warrants, trying to force parents to appear in court.

After an early relapse in the program, Garcia pushed through 10 months of sobriety before her sons came home to her in June. She cried for an hour when she saw them.

But caring for the children is not always easy. The court has helped her, from finding therapy for them to setting up an inspection for their new house. A few days before her move-in date, Garcia came to court looking for words of support.

"This is the first time I'm going into the real world," Garcia said. "It's just me and my kids."

Some parents never make it this far, parents who simply can't push past their addictions or mental illness.

The court works with those parents to place their children in the strongest home possible. They call it another kind of success. It saves the state a costly legal battle. It eases a child into a stable home. But when it happened recently, there was sadness in every corner of the court.

The birth mother was months into her recovery at the time, still struggling with a 14-year addiction to crack. She checked into court by speakerphone. She had not decided whether to give up her son.

Then she heard the foster parent reading a letter aloud to the court. It was a small story, about how much this new boy meant to their family. The birth mother heard the caring in it, and she made the decision. It was time to let go.

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