

Doubling Down on Rehab

Program gives addicts who violate probation a chance to avoid being sent back to jail

One in a series of occasional articles about opiate abuse and its consequences.

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Photo by Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff



Quincy District Court has long had an adult drug court that allows addicts convicted of certain crimes to go on probation and seek treatment and counseling through programs in the community, instead of serving their sentence in prison. If the offenders violate their probation while in the program — for example, by taking drugs, not going to counseling, or committing another crime — they typically return to jail while they await a hearing on the new violation. Until now.

A new partnership between Norfolk County Sheriff Michael G. Bellotti, Judge Mary Beth Heffernan of the drug court, and the Gavin Foundation allows some men who violate their probation to get into a long-term care residence for people in recovery from drug addiction. Bellotti said that if law enforcement and correction officials only try to limit risk and liabilities by incarcerating recalcitrant individuals, opportunities to bring meaningful changes that can help people be rehabilitated could be missed.

“We need to make sure these folks are in . . . a community-based program tied to resources,” he said in a recent interview, a few weeks after the program began.

The Gavin Foundation, which operates several treatment centers in the Boston area, has made up to eight beds available for the initiative. The Norfolk County sheriff’s office would like to add more beds once the program is established, said Superintendent Gerard Horgan. The foundation has long had a program for drug addicts who are serving out their sentences in treatment, but allocating beds for people who are accused of violating their probation while they await their hearing began only this summer. The new program is an effort to help people in drug court who have had a relapse or other problem in the later phases of the drug court proceedings, its proponents say.

“We know that reentry is an important aspect of keeping the community safe,” said John McGahan, the foundation’s chief executive. “It’s an important part of our mission.”

When men in drug court are sent to the Norfolk County jail for violating probation, Bellotti and his staff determine which inmates would be good candidates for long-term treatment, typically at the Gavin Foundation’s Charlestown, Dorchester, or South Boston locations. They are usually transferred after a 10-day evaluation, which includes a medical screening, a check to see whether they have any outstanding warrants, and an interview with foundation staff. Those with records of violent crimes, escapes from custody, or restraining orders are typically not sent outside the jail for treatment before their trial, Bellotti said.

There is no similar program for women inmates from Norfolk County, who are held at MCI Framingham, said Horgan. Women in state custody at Framingham are subject to state procedures, and there are no plans to begin holding women in Dedham, Horgan said. Heffernan, who presides over the drug court in Quincy, said she has noticed that, in general, more treatment beds are being opened for women, and that the Probation Department in Quincy is working on finding more treatment options for women.

Inmates who go into drug treatment wear electronic bracelets that track their movements. Since the partnership began Aug. 3, just one inmate has walked away from treatment, and he was later located, Bellotti said. If people who are sent to treatment violate the terms of their probation again, they can be put back in jail, he said.

Heffernan said working with the drug court's "high-risk, high-need" population is a combination of art, science, and law. The court is made available to people who have violated their probation in Quincy District Court and is offered as an alternative to incarceration, she said. Some offenders choose drug court, others choose incarceration, she said. People who have arson, manslaughter, or sex offenses on their records are not eligible, because they cannot be placed in treatment, though some violent offenders are eligible for drug court, she said.

Heffernan said people who have successfully gone through several phases of the program, which is typically 18 months long, sometimes break the conditions of their probation in the last stretch. The threat of serving their original sentences in jail, instead of in treatment with probation supervision, is always there, but treatment is preferable whenever possible, she said.

"It's another tool that we need, for sure," she said of the new program.

The arrangement between the Norfolk County sheriff's office and the Gavin Foundation, providing intensive long-term treatment with GPS monitoring, is a stricter level of supervision than drug court participants would typically have, Heffernan said. For Bellotti, the partnership is a way to allow people who would otherwise be in jail to access treatment programs in an effort to rehabilitate them and prepare them for life outside of the criminal justice system, he said.

It's also cost-effective.

The sheriff's office pays \$102 per day for an inmate to be in long-term residential treatment, cheaper than the \$165 per inmate at the Dedham House of Correction, Bellotti said. It also helps solve another challenge at the jail: more people awaiting trial than have been sentenced.

"This jail is not built for that," he said.

The law requires the county to keep detainees awaiting trial and those who have been sentenced separate. And people who are awaiting trial tend to be at the jail longer than they have in the past, Bellotti said. On the pretrial side of the jail, there are fewer programs and services for inmates and detainees than there are on the side for the sentenced — another reason for Bellotti's preference for the drug treatment option.

Joanne Peterson, who founded Learn to Cope, a Taunton-based network of support groups for Massachusetts families that have faced drug addiction, said many families in her organization support treatment for addicts facing criminal charges. Norfolk County has seen more than 1,200 deaths from opioid-related overdoses since 2000, and families continue to search for help for loved ones dealing with addiction, she said.

"They need treatment — that's why they're getting in trouble in the first place," Peterson said.