

Virginia-Pilot 2/29/2008

State drug courts fight for funding

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The Virginian-Pilot
© February 29, 2008

Drug court administrators around Hampton Roads have rallied supporters to urge state legislators to maintain funding for the programs.

As legislators prepare to hash out competing versions of the budget, drug courts are one of the items on the table. The Senate has included \$5.9 million in its version of the two-year budget to maintain the programs, but the House version eliminates the money. Gov. Timothy M. Kaine supports funding the drug courts.

Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Chesapeake, Hampton and Newport News are among nearly 30 jurisdictions statewide that use drug court programs to help addicts with nonviolent charges into rehabilitation through intensive supervision programs monitored by the court. Several of those programs receive state money to help pay for counselors, probation officers and other employees.

Proponents say the courts help longtime drug users overcome addiction and become productive members of society. Most programs require participants to submit to drug screens, attend support-group meetings and maintain employment, and also may require the payment of fines, child support, or other court costs. Those who fail to complete the programs can receive jail time on the charges that landed them in court.

"Our judges are not social workers and they shouldn't be social workers," said Sen. Kenneth Stolle, R-Virginia Beach, a member of the Courts of Justice Committee. "If we have dollars to put into after-care, then we ought to spread it equally over all the people that need that, not allow judges to hand-pick the people they want to bring into their drug court."

But another committee member, Sen. Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, said she was grieved by the House's removal of drug court funding.

"Without a program like that, many people don't make it," she said. "I am a firm believer that drug courts work in the best interests of the people and communities who benefit from those programs."

Larry Robinson, president of the Virginia Drug Court Association, said the money the state spends on drug courts actually represents a savings. Drug courts spend an average of \$2,190 per participant per year, he said. Housing those same people in prison for their drug convictions would cost between \$22,000 and \$24,000 per person per year for adults, and more than \$100,000 per year for juveniles, he said.

With more than 1,300 people in drug court programs statewide, he said, costs could spiral if the programs ended.

"Just do the math," Robinson said. "We're not insensitive to what the state is going through. But why would they suggest to cut programs that are proven, successful and will save money?"

Delegates said all of this year's budget cuts have been difficult, but choices had to be made. "I can make that argument several dozen times for the things we've had to do," Del. Chris Jones, R-Suffolk, said. "In tough economic times, you have to make decisions that aren't easy or pleasant."

Del. Phil Hamilton, R-Newport News, said the state hasn't funded all of the drug courts in Virginia, so it's only fair to eliminate funding for all of them. "Treat them all the same," he said.

Norfolk drug court graduate Gary McKoy wrote a letter to the budget committees. His criminal record began in the 1970s and continued until 1999, he said, when he was accepted to drug court. He has not been in trouble since then, he said, and has held the same job for eight years.

"Drug court changed the life of a problem child to that of a good working, taxpaying citizen, no more crime, all because of drug court," McKoy wrote.

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