



The Sixth Judicial Circuit of Florida

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Pinellas County Wins Grant To Fight Domestic Violence

CLEARWATER - More defendants accused of domestic battery in Pinellas County will be ordered into batterer intervention programs, and will undergo drug testing more frequently, thanks to a \$864,210 federal grant awarded to Pinellas County's Office of Justice Coordination.

Victims of domestic violence too will benefit from the three-year grant, since more domestic violence advocates will be on hand to assist them by, among other things, planning for their safety, and, if needed, steering them toward housing and child care assistance, as well as counseling services.

The grant was awarded by the Office of Violence Against Women under the U.S. Department of Justice, with the funds provided through the 1994 Violence Against Women Act. The grant went into effect Oct. 1, and services are expected to begin by January.

As a result of the funds, the court system in Pinellas will partner with the county's Office of Justice Coordination, the Pinellas County Sheriff, and the two non-profits in Pinellas County whose mission it is to stop domestic abuse – Community Action Stops Abuse, or CASA, in St. Petersburg, and Religious Community Services, or RCS, in Clearwater -- to improve the county's response to criminal misdemeanor domestic violence.

“This grant from the U.S. Department of Justice will ensure that Pinellas County's response to crimes of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking are treated as serious violations of criminal law through the coordinated involvement of our law enforcement, judicial and community-based victim service providers,” said Deborah Berry, Operations Manager, Pinellas County Justice Coordination. “These funds will improve our collaborative efforts, resulting in enhanced responses that support victim safety and offender accountability.”



Judge Holly Grissinger

Recently, there have been only two groups of men attending a batterer intervention program at the Pinellas County Jail each week. As a result of the grant, that will expand to four men's groups a week, plus two women's groups, with each group typically consisting of 15 defendants.

At a batterer intervention program, defendants typically learn to have empathy for their victims, and to change their attitudes regarding power and control in their domestic relationship. The aim is to stop recidivism.

By giving more defendants access to batterer intervention programs by having them start in the jail, stakeholders hope to have a program completion rate of 35 percent or better, with 300 enrollees a year. There were only 113 offenders assigned to batterer intervention programs from May, 2017 to February 2018, with only 15, or 13 percent, successfully finishing the program.

There will also be an effort to have defendants start participating in the intervention programs as soon as possible, without any extended waits. Ideally, they will begin soon after their arrest, either on an original charge of domestic battery or on a charge of violating their domestic battery probation, and can already be attending classes before a judge hears the case.

Defendants who are on probation for domestic violence will also undergo more testing for alcohol and substance abuse, with the number increasing from five to six times a year to twice monthly. The drug testing is paid for with money from the grant.

As for the victims, there will now always be an advocate assisting whenever they go to the courtroom where Pinellas County Judge Holly Grissinger presides over cases involving misdemeanor domestic battery at the County Justice Center in Clearwater. Previously, such advocates were stretched thin, by their responsibilities in felony divisions and Unified Family Court, so they weren't always available in the county's misdemeanor domestic violence court.

These advocates, from CASA and RCS, direct victims to resources they might otherwise not know of, such as assistance with housing, food, child care, and counseling. They will also provide moral support during court proceedings.

Also as part of the grant, representatives of the major stakeholders – which include the Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney's Office, the Pinellas-Pasco Public Defender's Office, and the Pinellas Sheriff's Office, which oversees misdemeanor probation and whose staff will be overseeing the batterer intervention programs at the jail – will be trained to recognize the special needs of those from the LGTBQ community, and those who may be victims of human trafficking.

Sometimes, the first time members of these two groups become involved with the criminal justice system is when they appear in court in relation to a misdemeanor domestic battery case.