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Pinellas County Wins Grant To Establish Mental Health Court

CLEARWATER - There is expected to be a new mental health court in the Sixth Judicial Circuit thanks to a \$550,000 grant awarded earlier this month by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, which falls under the auspices of the U.S. Dept. of Justice.

It would be the latest problem-solving court to be established in the circuit, which already has, among others, drug courts, veterans' court, and drug dependency courts in both Pinellas and Pasco counties, the two that make up the circuit.

All are designed to use therapeutic measures, rather than the threat of punishment, to prevent crime and improve the lives of county residents charged with a low-level crime.

In the problem-solving courts already established, the underlying factors are typically alcohol and substance abuse. In the newly-established mental health court, the primary underlying factor that will be addressed will be one or more mental disorders.

"This project aims to address the frequent jailing of Pinellas residents with serious mental health disorders by diverting them away from the criminal justice system and into community-based treatment and support services," said Michelle Ardabily, the circuit's chief deputy court administrator who oversees the implementation of grants.

The mental health court is the brainchild of State Attorney Bruce Bartlett, Ardabily said, and the main applicant for the grant was Pinellas County government. Once it gets up and running, it is expected to serve 40 defendants a year.

During the first year of the three years the grant covers, a steering committee will discuss the particulars of setting up the new mental health court, or MHC, at the beginning of year two.

Among those on the steering committee will be representatives from the State Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, court administration, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, the Department of Corrections, the University of South Florida's Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, and Directions for Living, a non-profit organization one of whose missions it is to help those affected by trauma.

Another non-profit organization in Pinellas County that will play a significant role is the Suncoast Center, which also provides trauma-related services, Ardabily said.

The money will be allotted for, among things, a case manager, someone from the state attorney's office who will screen applicants to see who qualifies, and a therapist. And USF's mental health institute will be involved in training on topics such as recognizing mental illness.

A prosecutor and assistant public defender will be assigned to devote a portion of their time to the special court, and a circuit judge is expected to add mental health court defendants to his calendar.

As is the case with most problem-solving courts in the sixth circuit, court administration will keep a close eye on the data generated by the new court through a program by Social Solutions called Efforts to Outcomes. This is expected to help evaluate the new court's successes and failures.

Pinellas County government had already taken steps to deal with its mentally-ill constituents, and the mental health court is expected to be an additional piece of that effort, Ardabily said.

For instance, in 2018, Pinellas County participated in a CUNY Institute for State & Local Governance study of frequent jail utilizers in 10 U.S. jurisdictions, Pinellas being one of the ten, according to county documents.

Those incarcerated frequently were significantly more likely – 2.4 times more likely to be exact – than those not frequently incarcerated to be flagged for mental illness or serious mental illness, the documents showed.

The circuit learned that the county had won the grant on Dec. 7.