

Carlson to coordinate problem-solving courts

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Scott Carlson will coordinate a statewide program to set up problem-solving courts. (Robert Becker)

The problem: prisons and detention centers overcrowded with adults and children who do their time but get nothing to help them make it on the outside.

One solution: special courts to divert people from incarceration and help them combat drug abuse, alcoholism, domestic violence or other issues.

Last week, Nebraska hired Scott Carlson to coordinate the establishment of such "problem-solving" courts statewide.

Carlson, the Lancaster County Juvenile Drug Court coordinator, begins his new job July 1.

"It started in California and Florida about 15 years ago," Carlson said of the courts, "and has been so successful, there are over a thousand of them now."

Nebraska so far has nine adult, juvenile or family drug courts, including ones in Lancaster, Douglas, Sarpy, Scotts Bluff, Cheyenne and Hall counties. In addition, family or adult drug courts are being developed in Lancaster County and in the state's second, seventh and eleventh judicial districts.

Carlson will help coordinate the creation of similar problem-solving courts in all of the state's 12 judicial districts. The Nebraska Supreme Court's goal is to have at least two of the courts in each district, one for adult court and one for juvenile court.

"This is about access to the justice system," Supreme Court Chief Justice John V. Hendry said. "We want it so that people in the west, south, east and north have the same (court) services."

Carlson said each district would tailor their courts to local needs. Some districts might choose drug courts, while others might develop domestic violence courts. Still others, he said, might establish courts for drunken drivers.

"The districts would focus on what they need," he said. "My job is to get out there and help get the communities organized."

The courts would generally operate like existing drug courts. In those courts, participants get pending criminal charges against them suspended in exchange for completing counseling and drug treatment, and oftentimes community service.

Also, participants meet often with program coordinators and are subject to random and regular drug testing.

It's an intense program that emphasizes accountability and leaves participants with fewer opportunities to beat the system than regular probation.

"It's so successful because it's out-patient treatment with supervision," Carlson said. "It's a highly intense program."

And, by many accounts, successful.

More than 70 percent of drug court participants nationwide successfully completed their programs, the Nebraska Supreme Court said earlier this year.

And the cost of drug court participation is significantly less than the cost of incarceration.

According to a May 2004 report on the Douglas County Drug Court, state and local governments saved \$11,336 for each participant compared to defendants who did not participate in drug courts, the Supreme Court reported.

District Judge Robert B. Ensz of Wayne said the courts "had the potential to be very useful."

He and District Judge Patrick G. Rogers preside over the judicial district that includes Antelope, Cuming, Knox, Madison, Pierce, Stanton and Wayne counties. It could have a drug court sometime next year.

Judges, law enforcement officers, educators, counselors and others within the district are being trained to run the court and work with participants. To help get the court up and running, the district is applying for federal grants set aside for such programs.

"The court could be very useful in getting people out of prison, back in their homes and working as productive citizens," Ensz said.

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