

Amid Budget Woes, Ky. Cuts Juvenile Drug Court

by Brenna Angel

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Across the country, state and local governments have been forced to make tough decisions in order to bridge budget gaps. In Kentucky, that meant phasing out family and juvenile drug court. As Brenna Angel of member station WUKY reports, saving a little money now will mean Kentucky will pay more in the long run.

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MICHELE NORRIS, host:

Across the country, state and local governments have had to make tough decisions in order to bridge budget gaps. In Kentucky, one such decision phased out family and juvenile drug court.

As Brenna Angel of member station WUKY reports, cutting the programs may save money in Kentucky now but will cost more in the future.

BRENNA ANGEL: Christy Hanley(ph) was 16 years old when she started using drugs. She eventually got hooked on crack cocaine. Ten years and three kids later, Hanley is finally clean and realizes the magnitude of being a parent to three little girls.

Ms. CHRISTY HANLEY: This is the beginning: becoming a mom, growing up, dealing with life without being high and messed up and no responsibility whatsoever.

ANGEL: Hanley shared her story at the December graduation ceremony for the family and juvenile drug court programs of Fayette County. Due to budget cuts, these programs are now abolished.

Drug courts are intensive intervention and substance abuse treatment programs. The parents in family drug court are addicts whose kids have been removed from the home by social workers. The juvenile program is for teens who spend more time getting drunk or high than going to school.

Judge Lucinda Masterton headed up the family and juvenile drug courts in Fayette County. She met with program participants each Thursday.

Judge LUCINDA MASTERTON: In the regular system, it's all about blame. It's all about you, drug addict you, finger-pointing. That's not what drug court is about. Drug court is about healing. And healing these families.

Mr. DOUG MARLOWE (Director of Law and Ethics Research, National Association of Drug Court Professionals): When all said and done, what's different about drug courts is you get better compliance. You get people - the kids actually go and stay in treatment long enough for the effects to be felt.

ANGEL: That's Doug Marlowe with the National Association of Drug Court Professionals. He says there is a growing body of research on the effectiveness of family and juvenile drug courts, including a 2007 study funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

A review of family drug courts in four counties - two in California, one in Nevada and one in New York - found reductions in parental drug abuse, higher rates of parents completing treatment effectively and higher rates of family reunification.

Mr. MARLOWE: You should expect treatment completion to be the rare exception, unless you have that court monitoring.

ANGEL: Last year, Kentucky's judicial branch faced a budget deficit of nearly \$7 million - more than a hundred court system positions were eliminated, and family and juvenile drug courts were phased out as of this month.

Kentucky's adult criminal drug court remains active. There's also evidence that family and juvenile drug courts save money, although no long-term comparison study has been done in Kentucky.

Judge Masterton already has her proof that drug courts work. She looks to people like Christy Hanley or the dozens of other people Masterton hugged and cried with on drug court graduation day.

Judge MASTERTON: That woman's life was saved because of drug court. Now, what's that worth to the state of Kentucky? What's that worth to the United States?

ANGEL: And Kentucky is not alone. In recent weeks, Montana and South Dakota have begun to consider cuts to their drug court programs as a way to shore up budget problems.

That was the situation for the city of Denver in 2002. Officials there eventually brought drug courts back in 2007, and researcher Doug Marlowe now says Denver's program is actually bigger than ever.

For NPR News, I'm Brenna Angel in Lexington, Kentucky.

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