

DRUG COURT PROGRAM ENDS AFTER 15 YEARS



PHOTOS BY DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Drug Court Commissioner Kim Baskett gets her picture snapped with graduate Stephanie Meyling on Thursday, the last day of the popular and successful program, which is ending due to budget cuts.

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Court's
Lack of funds and participation contributed to decision to close, judicial officials say

By Calvin Men

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SANTA CRUZ » Stephanie Renee Meyling spent 15 months in drug court struggling with her addiction.

When the 34-year-old stepped up to the podium for her graduation Thursday, she declared she was 95 days sober. Before participating in the program — an alternative to traditional probation focused on helping drug addicts kick the habit through intense, long-term treatment — she couldn't hold down a job for more than a few months because of her addiction.

"I was flaky and ended up getting high or drunk and not showing up," she said.

After thanking drug court officials for believing in her, Meyling stepped forward to take a

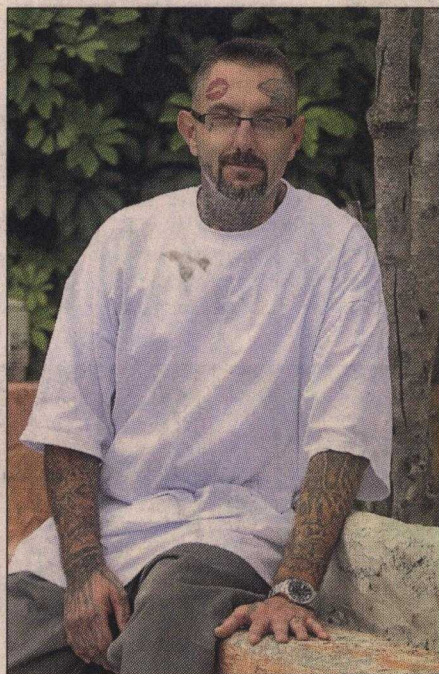
photo with Commissioner Kim Baskett, who has overseen drug court for the past three years. The two hugged each other and smiled widely.

"These people that are drug court clients, they want to make the bench officer proud of them," Baskett said.

Thursday's graduating class of four was the last for the Santa Cruz County Drug Court Program.

While drug court has run successfully for 15 years, judicial officials opted to end it because of dwindling financial resources from the state and lack of participation from key county agencies, said Judge Paul Marigonda, presiding judge for Santa Cruz County Superior Court.

"It wasn't a unsustainable model for us," Marigonda said.



Danny Chisholm successfully completed the drug court program after years of heroin use.

Drug

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Losing effectiveness

Drug court worked like this: Someone who was arrested and convicted of drug-related charges could ask a judge to consider sending them to drug court in lieu of jail time.

Program officials — who include a judicial officer, a public defender, a probation officer, a county health official and a drug treatment representative — considered whether the person was a viable candidate for the program. Offenders agreed to an intensive treatment process each week, including attending hours of group counseling and submitting to multiple on-the-spot drug tests.

A failed drug test or relapse could mean sanctions, with the worst being jail time at the judge's discretion, Baskett said. But there are no additional charges against someone who relapses in the program and no lengthy legal process.

The decision to shut down the program was unanimous among the county's 15 judicial officers after they determined the program lacked effectiveness.

"In order to have a successful drug court, you have got to have all the partners involved," Judge Marigonda said. "That all kind of went away."

On the court's part, a de-



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Commissioner Kim Baskett talks about the successes of Drug Court as she congratulates the graduates and encourages the other participants Thursday, the final day of the popular program.

cision was made to fund a case management system instead of drug court and other programs.

"You want to invest in your future with drug court but on the other hand, a brand new state of the art technical system," Marigonda said. "Without that, how can you measure what you're doing? Having the best records possible is one core function of any court system."

The District Attorney's Office withdrew from the program eight years ago because of a limited number of prosecutors, said Jeff Rosell, who worked in drug court as a prosecutor when it started.

"When the district attorney withdrew from drug court all those years ago, it was running very efficiently with minimal input from the District Attorney's Office," said Rosell. "We felt that we could bet-

ter serve the community by utilizing the district attorney that was in that courtroom to work on more serious criminal matters."

Others to serve

The county Probation Department, with fewer dollars dedicated to the program by the state, opted to focus efforts on higher-risk probationers and stopped sending an officer to participate in drug court more than a year ago, said Bill Penny, assistant chief probation officer. While he said there was a population left unserved with the loss of the program, he considered the larger picture.

"It leaves a hole but in terms of a hole for a smaller group of offenders that were participating in that," Penny said. "It has to do with in terms of you're leaving a hole for maybe 30 people versus a

hole for 300 people. That's a big difference."

James McMillan, who worked as the public defender in drug court, believed the program worked.

"What that did is it kept people from being afraid of coming to court because they knew worst-case scenario was, 'I was going to jail for the weekend,'" McMillan said. "So they'd come into court, take their lumps and start over again on Monday."

After successfully completing the program, many participants had their charges reduced or dropped and fines waived.

Danny Chisholm, a Watsonville resident who had a 20-year history of drug use, completed the program earlier this year and has been sober since.

In 2012, he was a heroin addict when he and his wife were arrested on drug charges. Police took the two to jail while their two sons were taken into protective custody and put into a foster home.

Chisholm was willing to do anything to get his sons back and was offered a place in drug court. He was subject to random drug tests three times and required to attend hours of group therapy each week, but when he relapsed six months into the program, he was jailed for 40 days.

"It was the best thing that ever could've happened to me," said Chisholm, 43. "I never thought I would be thanking a judge for sending me to jail but that's what I did."