

Drug Treatment Court offers fresh start to addicted offenders



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Vancouver Provincial Court Judge Harbans Dhillon presides over Drug Treatment Court

On a recent Tuesday afternoon, Michael stood before Vancouver Provincial Court Judge Harbans Dhillon and told her he was ready to change his life.

“Before I came in here, I was on the longest drug run of my life. I was using for four years daily,” Michael said.

Dhillon called for a round of applause to mark Michael’s formal admission to the 15-year-old drug treatment court.

And she asked Michael his views on the program to which he was committing the next year of his life.

“I was a little hesitant obviously going into something new,” he said. “But it is the best thing I have seen out of the system ever.”

Many of the addicted offenders who’ve entered the program lavish praise on its staff — from medical personnel and counsellors at the treatment centre to Dhillon, the veteran provincial court judge who has presided over the specialty court since October 2014.

When the drug court job came open, Dhillon jumped at the opportunity.

“It is a great honour and privilege to be doing this work and to be really seeing the community in all its difficulties and trying to find justice in it,” she said in an interview.

“I had been a judge for 15 years and had done work in every area of the court and I was interested in doing drug treatment court because it provides a different view of justice.”

Ordinary criminal court involves hearing the facts of a case, then submissions, rendering judgment and sentencing those convicted.

“In drug treatment court, an individual comes in and says, ‘I am willing to plead guilty and accept responsibility. I’m an addict. I need treatment,’ and, as a judge, I follow that individual and that individual’s case until that person can get as far as they can in their treatment, including we hope to graduation and we sentence at the end of that process.”

She gets to know the people she sees week after week, which is evident on Tuesdays and Thursdays when those in the program arrive in courtroom 303 to check in.

Dhillon asks how they’re finding the intense program, but she also asks after family members, pets, even what character on Game of Thrones they like best.

She offers encouragement when the reports in front of her show clean urine tests. She thanks them for their honesty when they admit they’ve slipped.

Dhillon asked The Sun not to use full names of the program participants to protect their privacy.

The program can last anywhere from 14 months to two years depending how quickly participants progress through its four phases. It starts with daily sessions at a treatment centre.

“It is said by many that this court’s program is demanding. And it can be arduous. Sometimes it is easier just to do time in jail,” Dhillon said.

“But those who take this court’s program know that they will become stabilized and we hope healthy and whole. And the research bears that out.”

A 2012 Simon Fraser University study found that drug-related recidivism of program participants was reduced by 56 per cent over a two-year period and overall criminal re-offending was reduced by 35 per cent.

Dhillon said the success comes from all the social supports available to participants, including addictions treatment with counsellors, a doctor and public health nurse. There is also financial support, help with housing, and a court team that works closely with the treatment team.

“So there is a collaborative team that is working to find a way to carry out what has been termed therapeutic jurisprudence,” Dhillon said.

Key people on the court team are federal prosecutor Maggie Knowlan and defence lawyer Debra Carpentier.

Their roles in courtroom 303 are less adversarial than they would be in traditional criminal court. Both say the work is “very rewarding.”

“The approach is the movement of the individual towards a treatment recovery goal as opposed to a keep-him-out-of-jail goal, which is obviously a very different perspective,” Carpentier said.

“But as I keep saying to everyone, it is not a get out of jail free pass. It’s the hard way, not the easy way. And they have to be committed to their recovery.”

Normally when dealing with an accused, a prosecutor, like the judge, only “sees this snapshot and you don’t really know what happens to them,” Knowlan added.

“This is very different in that you follow an accused through the system for months, even years,” she said.

People only qualify for the program if their crimes are committed as a result of addiction and are non-violent. Most charges are drug trafficking, though addicts also often get charged for theft and possession of stolen property, Knowlan said.

As proceedings begin, Knowlan points to a white board with “all-star” written at the top. On it are the names of those who have had drug-free tests.

Dhillon congratulates them. Their names go into a draw for a \$20 gift card for Safeway or London Drugs. The bond is so strong between participants that they sometimes give the gift card to a friend in the program who’s been unlucky in the draw.

Before Dodie graduated from drug treatment court in January, she was a regular all-star.

“Being so financially limited and with children, it was kind of incentive to get on that all-star list,” Dodie said in an interview.

She had been facing 12 charges when her lawyer suggested she try to get into the program.

“I’d never had a criminal record up to that point. Not because I didn’t deserve it, but I had just never got caught for anything,” she said.

And she was ready for change. Her children were in ministry care. She wanted them back. She saw drug treatment court as a way to make that happen. She got treatment for her addiction even before being formally admitted.

“I came into the program clean.”

She also found out she was pregnant — another motivation for success. Halfway through the program, her baby was born.

“I think for me what was so instrumental is the commitment that it was going to take and the consistency that I would have to just being responsible and accountable for my actions,” Dodie said.

Of Judge Dhillon, she said: “I have never experienced somebody who was so compassionate, encouraging and supportive.”

A court team member knitted her a baby blanket. Knowlan passed along some of her toddler’s baby clothes. Dodie got a “beautiful basket” from the whole court when she gave birth last summer.

She said the resources she was able to access allowed her to deal with her addiction and the underlying mental health issues that led her to criminality. She now has her kids back. She is trying to get into Vancouver Community College to become an addictions counsellor.

“As of right now, I haven’t engaged in anything as far as the criminality for close to two years and I’ve been clean for over two years,” she said proudly.