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# Cobb Mental Health Court to Hold First Graduation

Katheryn Hayes Tucker, Daily Report

October 21, 2015

An accountability court for nonviolent criminal defendants with mental health diagnoses that started 2½ years ago will hold its first graduation ceremony Thursday.

The seven graduates of Cobb County Mental Health Court will be recognized in the ceremonial courtroom of the Cobb County Superior Courthouse at 2 p.m. before Judge Mary Staley, who has led the program.

The graduates have completed at least 24 months of participation in the program, which includes weekly court sessions with the judge and continuous treatment, therapy and medical assistance. Some have overcome underlying drug and alcohol addictions, homelessness and child abuse to reach this milestone, which will set aside their criminal charges without any additional jail time.

"No one chooses to be mentally ill," Staley said in a news release. "Mental illness is devastating to not only the individuals who suffer, but also to their families and communities." She said mental health court "holds participants accountable for their conduct, and through various life skills training and therapy, teaches them a new way to live."

The Cobb County Sheriff's Office has reported that 33 percent of its inmate population is diagnosed with a mental illness, and an estimated \$300,000 per year is spent on medications to treat them, according to the news release. The court's stated mission is to improve health, promote self-sufficiency, reduce recidivism, offer cost-effective alternatives to incarceration and hospitalization and increase effective cooperation between mental health professionals and the criminal justice system.

Cobb also runs accountability treatment courts for defendants with drug additions and for veterans. Cobb County Superior Court Judge Reuben Green launched the veterans' court. Senior Judge George Kreeger is the longtime drug court leader.

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