

Ada Co. Domestic Violence Court named national 'mentor court'

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BOISE -- Ada County's Domestic Violence (DV) Court program seeks to intervene in domestic violence situations before they escalate by providing comprehensive services to an offender and his or her family. The program is now being recognized by the Department of Justice as a mentor court to serve as a nationwide resource.

The DoJ's Office on Violence Against Women selected courts in Ada County; Brooklyn, New York; and Dallas, Texas to serve as the models and host site visits for judges and prosecutors from around the country.

One of Ada County's DV Court judges, Carolyn Minder, allowed KTVB access to one of her hearings so we could learn more about the process, and why the program is considered so successful.

Inside the DV courtroom

Unlike specialty courts, like drug court, DV Court is something a defendant goes straight into shortly after charged, and operates just like any other criminal court from a process standpoint. The difference in DV Court for defendants is extra monitoring, programming and post-sentencing reviews.

Today, you saw a number of people that actually have pretty significant felony records that have done prison time, who for the first time in their lives are actually being closely monitored, and they're actually making the changes that needed to have been made years and years ago, Judge Minder explained after we watched a morning court review.

The DV Court process is also accelerated from a traditional process. According to the court, it takes an average of 58 days to get from arrest to sentencing in DV Court, but an average of 131 days in traditional court. The accelerated process is designed to keep victims safer by immediately beginning and keeping up with treatment, monitoring, and in some cases punishment.

Knowing that there is the judicial monitoring, and much more cohesive team effort in terms of the probation and parole department, all of the resources we can put to cases where lethality is very significant, Jan Bennetts, Ada County Prosecutor's Office Chief of Staff, said.

Prosecutor: I would say it's all about prevention and protection

Bennetts says when the court was initially created more than a decade ago and then revamped over the years, the goal was and is to reduce the number of domestic violence homicides in Idaho. In 2012, she says there were 22 domestic violence related deaths in Idaho, 18 were homicides and four were suicides.

The ultimate goal in developing the court was to prevent domestic violence homicides. I am firmly a believer that we don't recognize enough that domestic violence can end in death, in a homicide, in a victim being killed, Bennetts said. Where there is high danger to the victim, to the family, to the community, we know there is tight monitoring, it allows for us to ensure we're keeping people safe.

An offender is on a track for their personal circumstances and behaviors; they are only released once the judge is satisfied with the progress. At case reviews, a probation officer, prosecutor, defendant, and defense attorney discuss the current status of a defendant's case with the judge.

Anonymous couple describes going through DV Court

The Ada County Domestic Violence Court Coordinator introduced KTVB to a couple who completed the program a few years ago. For the purpose of this story, we will call them John and Susan. The couple says not only did the DV Court program save their marriage, but also saved their lives. They explained John's alcohol-fueled anger grew and lasted for years before he ended up charged with misdemeanor domestic violence.

A friendship, and a trust, and a respect became fear, intimidation, and distrust, and there was a lot of alcohol involved, Susan said. Every day, life was different... I knew what to expect based on the clock, for the day. Because I knew at what point he would start. My days were always planned on what time it was... I knew when to talk to him, I knew when to call him, I knew when to approach him, I knew how to approach him. I could tell by his voice what mental state he was in.

At first the abuse was strictly verbal, but it later escalated to physical abuse. John says he never hit Susan, but he did grab her. He says his life began to revolve around alcohol, and that's when things were the worst.

It got to the point to where I was looking forward to getting up in the morning and getting a drink, John said. She was always mad at me because I was drinking. And I don't blame her a bit. And it made me mad because she was mad at me. I didn't think I was hurting her. [I thought] I wasn't hurting anybody, that I was just drinking.

For John and Susan, the escalation to arrest changed everything

Susan says, as things got worse, she was no longer herself. She had lost the courage and confidence she once had.

I was living in fear, and I wasn't living. I wasn't living. I was living moment to moment to moment, Susan said. I lost the ability to dream of tomorrow because it was all about the right now.

John can now admit he was hurting Susan and many other people around him. He says in the end when he was arrested, he actually was the one who called police. He'd been fighting with Susan and threw water on her face. His plan was actually to call police to get his wife's attention, to get her to wake up, something he admits doesn't make sense now.

I got tired of it, and that's why I called the cops... I didn't know I was going to be arrested that night. I just wanted her to wake up... wake up from what, I don't know. Wake up from me drinking? John said. I was tired of being me. That's what it really came down to. And I was tired of hurting people. Especially my wife.

A work in progress, all around

John went to jail for a month, and once released, as part of DV Court, he was immediately assigned to classes. He says the teachers in his classes changed his mind set and his life.

I think myself that this program is what changed me... I believe I'm changing, John said. I like the new me. But there's always room for improvement no matter where you go. Or what you do.

John and his wife weren't allowed to see each other for eight months, also as part of the program. Susan says that's what she thinks helped the most.

We had to grow ourselves, personally, get better, personally, and go through our classes, personally before you could ever put the two of us back together, Susan said.

John says he wouldn't have been surprised if Susan had left him, but he's very glad she gave him a chance to change and keep changing. Both say the work isn't done, but things are the way they'd like to keep them.

It's like night and day. I don't get up, and... drink. We go do things. We never used to do things. It was more important to drink than it was to go out and go to a family function or go to a movie or go to dinner. Unless I could drink. Now life is more important to me than 'Mr. Alcohol', John said.

Judge: It's the best work a judge can do

Bennetts and Minder say the success of the program can't be measured by numbers, but in cases like John and Susan's.

For me, it's actually the best work a judge can do because you get to be involved in seeing people make successes out of their lives and families becoming safer and children hopefully not getting into the cycle of violence, Judge Minder said.

Like the work and progress John and Susan hope to achieve, the Domestic Violence Court program also hopes to continue working and growing.

We can always look for ways to do a better job. A lot of that feedback comes from folks who have gone through the system who may look back and say, gosh it would have been so nice if you could have done x, y or z, Bennetts said.

In addition to being selected as a mentor court, the Ada County DV Court was also awarded a \$300,000 federal grant that went into effect on Tuesday. The money will go toward counseling for victims, a case manager for after sentencing, and additional treatment for offenders.

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