

## **Editorial: State should expand drug court programs**

**BY THE FREE LANCE-STAR EDITORIAL PAGE STAFF | Posted: Sunday, May 24, 2015 12:00 am**

A task force in Virginia is taking a hard look at how the state should deal with the increasing abuse of prescription drugs and heroin.

The group is not ready to submit final recommendations, but some on the panel seem to have arrived at an observation:

Continuing to simply lock up drug users has not worked.

The 32 members of the Governor's Task Force in Prescription Drug and Heroin Abuse have been meeting this year to seek ways to reverse the increasing number of criminal cases and drug overdoses in the state.

Deaths from heroin overdoses have reached almost epidemic proportions in recent years. In Virginia, 358 people died from heroin overdoses in 2012 and 2013. Four of those deaths were in the Fredericksburg area, according to the state medical examiner.

Traditional law enforcement efforts have not slowed the addiction or death rate.

But there are some ways to reverse the recurrent arrest-and-jail practices now in place.

Drug courts are in operation in about 30 localities in Virginia and, by most accounts, have been successful in dealing with people charged with non-violent offenses linked to drugs.

The rate of new convictions for drug court graduates is 34 percent, compared to 53 percent of defendants who do not participate in drug courts. The cost per defendant through drug court is \$20,000 less than that of those who didn't go through the program, according to reports compiled by the Virginia Supreme Court.

In the Fredericksburg area, drug courts are in operation for adults and juveniles. They serve the city of Fredericksburg and Stafford, Spotsylvania and King George counties.

The program is for those charged with drug offenses or nonviolent property crimes. They go through a pretrial screening process to determine whether they would be a good match for the program.

Participants obtain intensive outpatient counseling from clinicians at the regional Community Services Board. The services include individual counseling, group counseling, residential treatment referrals, mental health services and other services as needed.

There are random drug screens, return visits to courts and consequences for failing to complete the program.

Graduation is a big deal, with families and friends invited. It's held twice yearly.

To graduate from drug court, participants must spend at least 12 months in the program, be able to recognize personal relapse triggers and have a plan to deal with it, have four months of sobriety and negative drug screens and have full-time employment or be in school.

Between 1998 and early March of this year, the Fredericksburg-area program enrolled 786. Of those, 429 graduated and 357 were terminated.

So more than half of the participants broke the cycle of drug abuse-arrest-and-jail.

The program deserves the support of the task force members. It won't solve all the drug dependency problems, but it's clearly helping many turn their lives around.

From [http://www.fredericksburg.com/opinion/editorials/editorial-state-should-expand-drug-court-programs/article\\_19940290-03b7-11e5-87d3-b32f47daeddb.html](http://www.fredericksburg.com/opinion/editorials/editorial-state-should-expand-drug-court-programs/article_19940290-03b7-11e5-87d3-b32f47daeddb.html)