

Three graduate from Russell County's new drug court program

BY MICHAEL L. OWENS | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER
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LEBANON, Va. — The seemingly endless cycle of drug screens, weekly court appearances, counseling and surprise home inspections were almost as exhausting as the drug addiction.

For April M. Martin, a 28-year-old mother, membership in Russell County's new drug court program helped her fight her demon – alcoholism.

“I always wanted to be sober,” Martin said as her eyes misted behind her glasses. “I just didn't know how.”

On Tuesday, Martin and two others charged with substance abuse crimes graduated from the program a year after being asked to join.

They are the county's first graduating class.

Drug court is a treatment program offered to addicts as an alternative to jail time and other traditional punishments. Sex offenders, violent criminals and anyone convicted of selling drugs are barred from joining.

Virginia has 36 drug courts, all partially funded with a \$1.5 million federal grant. A recent study by the National Center for Drug Courts concluded that Virginia's program saves at least \$19,000 per offender when compared to traditional sentencing methods.

“You have to want it,” fellow graduate Timothy E. Hess said of kicking a habit and passing the court's rigorous regimen.

Hess, a 39-year-old construction worker, landed in the program following a methamphetamine charge.

“You can't come in here and just expect it to happen,” he added.

An audience of nearly 100 relatives, probation officers, police and state and legislative officials watched as the three graduates accepted diplomas marking their achievement.

“At first, I wasn’t a believer in this program,” county prosecutor Brian Patton told the crowd. “You see it every day: People reoffend and reoffend.”

He then nodded toward the three graduates.

Graduate Jessica Lynn Stiltner, a 29-year-old mom trying to regain full custody of her daughter, points to a methamphetamine charge as her gateway into the program.

“I’m just glad to be done,” she said after the ceremony. “It’s a lot to do. You have to be really dedicated to it.”

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