

Trempealeau County Recovery Court Celebrates Ten Years of Changing Lives

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
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The recent 10 year anniversary celebration demonstrated not only the success of the Recovery Court but the support of the entire Trempealeau County community. Everyone sees it as a wise investment that saves lives.

TREMPEALEAU COUNTY, WI - Addiction may begin in a very private way. But, healing from addiction can take a village and can be very public.

“This is a big challenge,” Taavi McMahon, the Trempealeau County District Attorney told me. “People get up in front of everyone in open court and spill the beans about their whole life.”

Recovery Court in Trempealeau County recently celebrated 10 years of helping addicts return to a healthy life and avoid prison. I was blessed to be a part of the anniversary celebration held in Whitehall.

“All of the Black Tar China Girls raise your hands,” said Kim Walker to the crowd of community members and graduates of the Recovery Court. Folks raised their hands. These were heroin or other opiate drug addicts who changed their lives.

Kim Walker worked with addicts through intensive outpatient counseling. Her smile and sparkling enthusiasm for life was infectious. Those recovering crowded around her and took “selfies” to mark the anniversary of the program that brought them from the brink of death to a

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full life in a supportive community.

I saw clearly how the Trempealeau County community rallied around the Recovery Court to help heal those suffering from addiction. Church members, food pantry workers, local employers, mentors and sponsors all played invaluable roles.

The Recovery Court team managed the anniversary celebration, including addiction counselors and behavioral health specialists, office staff, probation officers, law enforcement officers, mental health professionals, family court commissioners, the district attorney and the judge.

By every account I heard, Judge John Damon was the driving force behind Recovery Court. "I cannot emphasize enough, Judge Damon got it going," said Justice Coordinator Patrick Bell in a follow-up interview. Ten years ago, the retiring judge's vision led to several staff taking intensive training to learn skills necessary to run the court.

"We didn't have any money when we first started," Judge Damon told the crowd gathered at the Recovery Court celebration. "So when we rewarded the participants, we gave out candy bars." He laughed and handed each of the graduates of the program a chocolate bar in fond remembrance of their success.

Law enforcement also plays a key role in Recovery Court's success. Sheriff Rich Anderson spoke with the group reminding them of how far they have come and how much the Recovery Court is needed in the county.

Local employers, including Gold'n Plump and Whitehall Specialties, support the program by encouraging participants and allowing employees to take time off for therapy and drug testing.

County board leadership played a key role in the program's success. County Board Chair Dick Miller received an award at the celebration on behalf of the entire Board. Later District Attorney McMahon told me, "The County Board is very in favor of justice reform. We have a lot of good people who believe in redemption and believe in second chances."

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Justice Coordinator Patrick Bell, who worked with participants in Recovery Court for many years, told me about the importance of drug testing. “It really holds them accountable. People do relapse and slip off to the bad side again.”

Participants are required to call every day. Trempealeau County Health Department does drug testing. A randomized system tells recovering addicts when to test. Sometimes the system will order a test every day. Participants have a two-hour time slot to show up and be tested. Testing can detect drugs, including alcohol, taken many days prior. By the time a participant finishes the nearly two-year long program, they might be tested over 230 times.

Recovery Court is part of a movement across America to treat addiction rather than incarcerate addicts. The program is run through the court system often with some state money. Those who fail the program are incarcerated. However, completing the program allows recovering addicts to start their lives anew without prison.

“People do stay straight,” said Patrick Bell. He noted that many give back to the community. “A participant started an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] support group on his own...the program really works.”

The camaraderie among graduates and their enthusiasm for life moved me. Money was saved because these folks did not go to prison. Crimes were prevented. The community was safer. Moreover, lives were changed.