



NEWS RELEASE

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Family Drug Court in Jackson County recognized nationally for its drug treatment program

The Family Drug Court in Jackson County has been selected as one of five Peer Learning Courts in an award through the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The "Award of Excellence," received by the Court today, is designed to encourage other court systems across the nation to visit Kansas City to observe court proceedings here, and to become acquainted with the treatment programs that are offered.

"It is a great honor for our Family Drug Court team to be recognized," said Commissioner Molly Merrigan who is the judicial officer who has overseen the docket for 14 years.

In the Circuit Court in Jackson County, there are three drug court dockets. Two are at the Family Court; one serves parents and one serves juveniles. The third docket is at the Circuit Court for defendants who have been charged with minor criminal offenses. At all three courts, the judges oversee a drug treatment plan for those who have come into contact with the Court, providing encouragement where needed, and consequences for those who don't comply.

The Family Drug Court was started in April 1998 and has served about 1,300 families. To date, about 38 percent of participants have graduated from the program. Parents are brought into the Drug Court if their newborn baby has been exposed to drugs, if they are accused of child abuse or neglect, or if there are child welfare issues that are brought to the attention of the Court. In these types of cases, the goal is for the parents to reunite with their children, and that happens gradually if the parents successfully go through the drug treatment and parenting programs that are required.

A byproduct of this program is that the Court is able to find out if the parents are willing to do what it takes to regain full custody of their children. If not, the Court can move more quickly to place the child in a more permanent household or place them for adoption.

"The Family Drug Court works because of the many partnerships we have with service agencies in the area that are very committed to helping people conquer their drug and alcohol addictions and to become better parents," said Merrigan. "This award belongs to the many dedicated people throughout our community who help the Court with issues related to drug treatment, parenting skills, job skills, housing and medical concerns."

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