Richland County's drug court flourishing

Written by
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MANSFIELD -- Despite funding and staffing challenges, Richland County Drug Court continues to grow.

Chief County Probation Officer Dave Leitenberger said the local specialty court has a 78 percent graduation rate.

"I'll compare that to any drug court anywhere," Leitenberger said.

Common Pleas Judge James Henson and Leitenberger were in attendance Tuesday as the county commissioners proclaimed May as Drug Court Month.

Now in its 15th year, Richland County Drug Court was one of the first five systems of its kind in the state. Currently, there are 111 people in the program and 24 on a waiting list. If they complete the program, which usually takes 18 months to two years, they often can have the felony stricken from their record.

"Many employers won't accept people with a felony conviction," Henson said.

Leitenberger said the local drug court receives much of its funding through the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services. Funding has been cut 25 percent.

"The only thing that keeps us from growing (even more) is we're short-staffed," Leitenberger said. "We could use another probation officer."

Commissioner Ed Olson noted that such programs are "infinitely less expensive than sending someone to jail."

In other business, commissioners:

» Accepted the donation of a pontoon boat for the sheriff's department dive team from Chuck Kilgore.

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Heard a request from Sheriff Steve Sheldon and the Richland County division of the Northern Ohio Violent Fugitive Task Force to move the task force office from the former Peoples Hospital on Park Avenue East to the county courthouse. Since the task force started in 2009, Sheldon said the number of warrants has decreased from 5,500 to between 3,000 and 3,500.

"The task force has been instrumental in fighting crime and locking up the bad guys," he said.

Deputy U.S. Marshal Ross Wilber said the task force needs more office space. He proposed using part of the bottom floor of the courthouse the sheriff's office once used as a weight room. Commissioners said they would consider the request.

Received an update about CODA (Richland County Organization for Disaster Assistance). Rebecca Owens said 162 county households were affected by the Feb. 28 flood.

"The purpose of CODA is to assist people through the recovery process. CODA is the last resort," she said.

CODA focuses on people who don't have insurance and haven't been helped by other organizations.

Maj. Marcus Jugenheimer of the local chapter of the Salvation Army said CODA is running low on donations, which can be made at any First Merit Bank.

CODA's fiscal agent is the Mid-Ohio District of the United Methodist Church, 410 Park Avenue West, Suite 2, Mansfield OH 44906.

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