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Ex cons on drugs make new lives, records wiped out

Judges dismiss charges after rehab program

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Fourteen people wiped their slates clean Friday and earned a new opportunity to reclaim their family lives as free citizens during "graduation" from the San Juan Drug Court Program.

Participants and their families stood in front of judges Harry Massanet Pastrana, Wanda Cruz Ayala and Puerto Rico Supreme Court Chief Justice Federico Hernández Denton while their probation officers pleaded with the court for the dismissal of all criminal charges against them on account of their achievements in the program.

"It is with great satisfaction that I request the dismissal of all criminal charges against César J. Sánchez Alonso, who, after two years and a month on probation, has demonstrated great interest in his rehabilitation," said Corrections Department probation officer Alejandro Martínez to the judges. "Even though César had some initial problems that forced his temporary incarceration, he put all his effort into completing his treatment and leaving behind his addiction."

In a barely audible voice, Sánchez Alonso, who was accompanied by his wife and baby and his mother, thanked the court, its officials and his family for the support they had offered him during his treatment.

"I want to thank the court for all the help you have given my son. God bless you," said his teary-eyed mother, her voice choked with emotion.

For Chief Justice Hernández Denton the significance of the hearing could not be underestimated.

"This event has different meanings, depending on how you look at it. From a humane point of view, its significance is enormous ... From a legal standpoint, justice has been served," Hernández Denton said.

"But this is not only about reinsertion [of an individual] into society. It is also about [an individual] returning to live his family life in peace," he added.

Hernández Denton acknowledged the hurdles and difficulties. Citing one of the participants in the program, the Chief Justice agreed that the process was "difficult."

"As José Luis said before, 'this process requires an extraordinarily strong will,'" said Hernández Denton, referring to the statement offered to the court by José Luis Rodríguez, 63, the oldest Drug Court participant.

"That is why the support of the family is so important for your success," he added.

As each of the 14 persons stood in front of the court, their families stood beside them. Some of the babies in the courtroom wandered around making baby sounds and prompting smiles even from the Chief Justice, who more than once asked the families if the children wanted to address the court.

The sentence issued Friday orders all criminal records be sealed and kept from public access. Police records will also be expunged and all photos and fingerprints returned to the participants. Everyone received a certificate and a medal from the presiding judges.

Drug Courts are a program from the Judiciary that seek to rehabilitate participants, thus reducing drug and alcohol criminal recidivism. These courts operate under the "therapeutic justice" concept, which implies designing a treatment plan with agencies involved in the services offered to participants. The treatment is closely supervised by the court.

Hernández Denton praised the effectiveness of the program which has served more than 5,000 participants since its inception in 1996 and has a recidivism rate of less than four percent.

Hernández Denton also announced the creation of a Juvenile Drug Court program to serve youth from 12 to 17 years of age who have been arrested for non-violent violations related to drug used.

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