Keep Drug Court Alive
Fix, Don't Scrap Court

Regarding "Judge's Cases Of Compassion Touched Many" (Metro, Jan. 21):

This news story led me to believe that with the retirement of Judge Donald Evans, the drug court may be eliminated or greatly reduced. In my view that would be a big mistake.

Some history: In the early 1990s, while I was chairman of the Greater Tampa Chamber's Anti-Drug Task Force, we were attacking the drug problem in our community on a variety of fronts. We were looking at every program across the state and nation that seemed to have promise of helping addicts escape from the bondage of their disease. We realized that with the increase of drug abuse, the state simply could not build prisons fast enough to house those who committed crimes stemming from that abuse. We further realized that if prisons could not offer treatment for the abusers, they would simply return to their old ways when released. They would be arrested again and "revolving door justice" would begin. But we weren't naive. We also knew that some addicts would never enter treatment without the threat of punishment. After Stan Rosenkranz replaced me as chairman of the task force, he led a group of us to Miami to look firsthand at a program that had been initiated in that circuit, called simply "Drug Court." It combined supervised treatment with the threat of jail and had an able, tough judge in charge. It had been running for some time and was showing great promise. The task force adopted an objective of getting a program started in our Tampa circuit. Then Chief Judge Dennis Alvarez championed the cause, as did Don Evans, who had had a longtime interest in drug treatment and had been in the leadership of the Drug Abuse Comprehensive Coordinating Office for years.

The program was started and has been operating for many years. Evans eventually headed it up and stayed on until retirement a couple of weeks ago. I feel certain that over the years many addicts have been relieved of their affliction through this court. Many parents have been allowed to keep working and supporting their kids rather than have them dumped into an otherwise overburdened child welfare system. Many prison beds have been freed up to house truly violent felons.

Now, I will admit that I have not been personally involved in this program for quite a while. Maybe it has some flaws. But then let's fix it, not scrap it. Does anyone have a plan that makes more sense? And don't say, "Lock 'em up without treatment and throw away the key."
People, particularly sick people, seldom get better while we treat them worse and worse.

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Drug Court Works

Thank you for the story on Judge Don Evans! He saved my life too, and drug court really works if the person wants to change.

On Feb. 5, I will have been free from using drugs, from going to jail and from committing crimes for five years.

JUDY OLIVER
Tampa