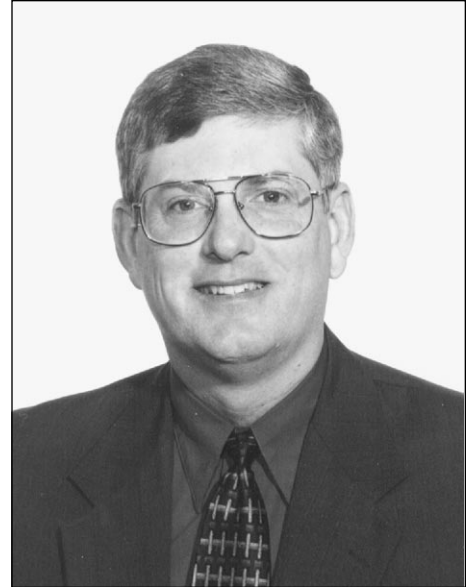


Juvenile Drug Treatment Court: An Interview with Circuit Judge Edward Sosnick

by *Kevin M. Oeffner*
Circuit Court Administrator



The Circuit Court launched its Juvenile Drug Treatment Court (JDTC) this past June. In the tradition of therapeutic jurisprudence, our JDTC utilizes community-based supervision and intensive counseling and treatment in lieu of incarceration. The goal is to help juvenile offenders overcome their substance abuse. Our hope is that, in the long run, intervention at the front end will keep young people out of the criminal justice system when they become adults. That translates into societal dividends through reduced recidivism, violence and economic loss attributable to crime.

Nearly two years ago, Circuit Judge Edward Sosnick volunteered to preside over the JDTC. After countless hours of preparation, and in addition to managing his civil and criminal docket, Judge Sosnick took the bench to preside over the first session of the JDTC on the evening of June 5. The court has been in operation for nearly five months. I recently sat down with Judge Sosnick to gain a look at the JDTC from his perspective.

Kevin: Judge, you refer to the JDTC as a “family-focused” court. Why?

Judge Sosnick: We’re dealing with adolescents. It’s not uncommon for substance abuse to be a response on the part of the adolescent to a breakdown of family relationships and trust. In order to stimulate a meaningful long-term behavioral change in a young person, the family must be involved. Young people need the support structure that the family provides. There is ample research to show that desirable behavioral change is more likely to occur when the family is involved.

Kevin: Our JDTC utilizes a team approach to monitor an offender’s progress. What organizations are represented on the team?

Judge Sosnick: The team includes representatives of the defense bar, prosecutor’s office, local schools, treatment provider community and mental health professionals. We also have a probation specialist and drug court coordinator on staff. The judge is also a member of the team. We’ve been through training, observed other drug courts in action, and expended many hours to build a program that will have lasting effects on the lives of our participants. As

judge, I’m very comfortable with the team approach.

We need the expertise of each member for the program to be successful.

Kevin: Our program requires the offender to plead guilty before he or she may participate. Why should a defense lawyer recommend that his or her client plead guilty?

Judge Sosnick: The obvious benefit is that the offender can avoid being incarcerated or otherwise placed outside of the home. Since we stress family participation, we have an opportunity to encourage the reestablishment or strengthening of family relationships. You should not underestimate the importance of the family support structure in overcoming substance abuse. Another important factor a defense lawyer should consider is the availability of wrap-around services and intensive treatment.

Kevin: A key to effective treatment is the offender’s willingness to participate. Should defense counsel recommend the JDTC if his or her client denies a substance abuse problem?

Judge Sosnick: Denial is part of the addiction. We want to break down the denial system through support, encouragement, rewards and sanctions. We all know that relapse is a common occurrence when an individual is combating a problem like substance abuse. We want the participant to understand that recovery is a process, it doesn’t happen overnight. Also, keep in mind that no one is admitted to the drug court without an objective assessment that the person is a high-risk abuser. Each prospective participant is thoroughly screened. We know what we’re getting. The team’s goal is to encourage the participant to acknowledge that he or she has an abuse problem, confront it head on and deal with it. It isn’t a picnic for the participants. The program begins with intensive outpatient counseling for three hours a night, three days each week, for a significant period. I expect participants to be honest with the team and to follow the rules. It comes down to choices. A participant can make bad choices and suffer the consequences. Positive choices will lead to positive outcomes. We do all we can to provide an environment to foster positive choices.

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Kevin: *Those of us involved with the JDTC understand that program success will be measured over the long term. Given that the JDTC is still in its infancy, what observations have you made that lead you to believe the program is on the right track?*

Judge Sosnick: I've seen meaningful changes. A subtle but unmistakable camaraderie among the participants is beginning to develop. They are becoming interested in the progress of their peers. I've been pleased that most of the families show genuine concern and are doing their part to help. Parents are becoming involved in goal setting and treatment planning. They're beginning to understand that success is related to their involvement and support. There are going to be ups and downs. The road is not always going to be smooth. All of us – the participants, their families, and the drug court team – must understand that success will be measured in years, not days or weeks. I couldn't be more pleased with the commitment and dedication of the drug court team. This group is committed to having an impact in the lives of these kids.

I'd like to thank Judge Sosnick for taking time to share his thoughts with me. I encourage you to come out and observe the juvenile drug treatment court in action. Court is in session every Tuesday evening at 5:30 p.m. in Judge Sosnick's courtroom.

Until next month ...