

Drug Court Movement in Mississippi

Mississippi is currently undergoing many changes regarding substance abuse and how to react to increasing statewide problems of drug use. The development of drug courts is one response the state and local communities have made to address substance abuse problems. The Drug Court movement in Mississippi has received tremendous support from the state's legislative and judicial bodies, as well as, the media and general public. Mississippians are beginning to realize the benefits of a treatment based approach in dealing with its non-violent drug offending population. It is important to note that the drug court process works in any size jurisdiction. The most metropolitan and the most rural areas of the state are benefitting by having drug court programs.

Drug court programs in Mississippi have developed quite recently. The first drug court began in Ridgeland Municipal Court in 1995. It was followed four years later with the first felony drug court program being created by Judge Keith Starrett in the 14th Circuit Court district. With this innovative and effective approach to dealing with alcohol and drug offenders along with the highly publicized success stories of the program and its participants, the drug court concept caught on. The concept started to gain the attention of the states judicial and legislative members who saw the drug court model as a promising alternative to traditional criminal case processing. Once started, the concept spread rapidly. By January 2003, when the legislative session convened, there were seven drug court programs in the state that were operational with five more in the planning stages. In April, Senate Bill 2605 was signed into law by the Governor of Mississippi. This new law, which goes into effect July 1, 2003, allows for the creation of drug court programs statewide adaptable to chancery, circuit, county, youth, municipal or justice courts. Since the passage of this new law, there has been great interest by judges across the state on how they can start a drug court program in their jurisdictions.

During the 2003 legislative session, Mississippi drug courts gained an unexpected supporter when State Auditor Phil Bryant held a press conference at the state capitol in Jackson. At his press conference the State Auditor released the results of a feasibility study conducted by the Performance Audit division of his office. The report concluded: "Resources and support provided at the local, state and national levels along with a nominal participation fee allow the establishment of drug court systems with the ability to provide the foundation for an effective, community-based strategy to reduce drug use and crime, generate cost savings at the local and state level and allow statewide exchange of information between Circuit Court districts." The report went on to say that "As the number of arrests and prosecutions increase, prisons become more overcrowded. Overcrowding leads to the need for building more prisons and financing them through tax dollars. Drug courts are a way to punish non-violent offenders less harshly than incarceration but more harshly than probation while reducing the need for construction of new prisons." The auditor's report estimated that Mississippi could save about \$5.4 million dollars annually based on 500 participants going into a statewide drug court system instead of being housed in the state Department of Corrections.

The new drug court law in Mississippi states that the Administrative Office of Courts shall be responsible for certifying all drug court programs in the state, ensure that all drug court programs comply with all applicable state and federal regulations, ensure that all drug court programs

comply with the rules promulgated by the State Drug Court Advisory Board and that all drug court programs operating in Mississippi shall follow the key components of drug courts.