

Representative Nelson, _____, thank you for allowing me to speak to you today about my experience with the drug epidemic in Westmoreland County as a Judge in the Court of Common Pleas.

Several months ago, I had a young girl come into my courtroom to turn herself in on a bench warrant, which I had issued for her because she failed to appear for a guilty plea hearing months prior. This young lady was 20 years old. She was a beautiful girl. I looked at her and I knew that this young lady was once much more beautiful. She was now thin and frail and her eyes screamed at me with desperation. I asked her why she missed her hearing and she said she had been kicked out of her mother's house and was living on the streets. She knew she had a hearing but was honest and told me that she knew she had a hearing and deliberately failed to appear because she was actively using. Normally, we have to go find these folks in active addiction. They don't come in and surrender themselves to the Sheriff's Department. So I asked her, "Why now? Why did you decide to turn yourself in today?" She said, "I came in today to ask you to put me in jail." My mouth dropped. I had never had an addict ASK to be placed into incarceration because no addict would ever ASK to be put into a situation of inevitable and inconsolable withdrawal. Addicts will do anything to avoid this fate and here I have a 20 year old girl asking for it. So I asked her why. "Why would you want to be incarcerated?" I will never forget her response to me. Through her tears, she said, "Because if you don't put me in jail today, I am going to die . . . and I don't want to die."

If you ask any of my fellow Criminal Court Judges here in Westmoreland County about the percentage of our cases that involve drugs and alcohol, they will tell you that it's more than 90%, meaning that almost ALL of the crime here in Westmoreland County involves substance abuse. According to our Warden, in recent months, as high as 72% of prisoners entering

Westmoreland County prison need detox treatment, and, unfortunately, individuals detained in our prison do not receive necessary drug and alcohol treatment due to funding constraints. According to our Single County Authority, 75% of those referred for substance abuse treatment to the SCA are criminal offenders, in comparison to only 37% statewide (2008). These statistics demonstrate that the crime in Westmoreland County is being driven by the drug epidemic.

In addition, the number of overdose deaths in our county has climbed steadily since 2002, increasing 290% during that period. Overdoses, both from prescription and illegal drugs, have been the leading cause of death among accidents and suicides in Westmoreland County in 7 of the last 8 years. There have been record overdose death numbers for 5 years in a row. This is a serious public health epidemic in Westmoreland County.

Nearly half of the pregnant female inmates are addicted and require treatment while incarcerated. Our judges have traditionally incarcerated a pregnant female addict who continues to use drugs in that it is the only method of insuring abstinence and health for the baby. Mom gives birth while incarcerated and then goes back to jail while her baby goes into foster care. This separation of mother and baby is often devastating to the emotional bond that is vital to a newborn and also to a new mom struggling with addiction.

In response to the overdose epidemic and crime in our county, the Court of Common Pleas has created and implemented a Drug Treatment Court, lead by Judge Christopher Feliciani and myself. We have operated this treatment court since September and are almost at capacity of 50 participants. Our participants are identified as high risk, high need criminal defendants. Veterans and pregnant women are a target population for our Drug Court program.

Our participants would be incarcerated or deceased, if not for this program. Drug Treatment Court is an 18 month program of intense supervision, substance abuse treatment, drug

screening, life skills, parenting classes, community service and more. This program is not easy. Our participants are immediately held accountable for negative behaviors and rewarded for positive changes. I am proud to say, and I will have to knock on wood here, that my participants have remained CRIME FREE since the inception of DTC in my courtroom. This, in and of itself, is a WIN for Westmoreland County.

Drug Court also aims to provide an alternative to incarceration for pregnant women, allowing Mom to get treatment, stay clean and hopefully keep her baby with her after birth. We have been sending pregnant inmates and new mothers to inpatient treatment programs that allow Mom and baby to stay together. These programs provide Mom with substance abuse treatment, and later, parenting classes and life skills. Basically, Mom is counseled on how to stay clean and be a good parent at the same time. Following the inpatient treatment program, Mom and baby usually move to a halfway house and then return home to continue with DC on an outpatient basis. This long-term structure gives both Mom and baby the best shot for a happy, healthy life together.

You've surely been told by now that addiction does not discriminate. I'm here to tell you that couldn't be more true. It could be my child. It could be your child. No one is safe from this. My participants are good people with so much to offer the world. They come from good, loving homes just like yours. They were good kids. They played sports. Some have a Bachelor's Degree, some even a Master's Degree. They grew up in Murrysville, Penn Township, Ligonier, Hempfield Township among others.

They don't want to live like this. They want change. They BEG for change. They just don't know how to do it. They don't know where to start. Their only experience with the court system is being scolded by a judge as they come in and out of the system over and over again.

Drug Treatment Court is different. Judge Feliciani and I lead a team of the best of the best in the court system. Our team is made up of an ADA, PD, Probation Officers, a detective, a Case Manager, Treatment Providers and Certified Recovery Specialists. Our team is totally invested in our participants. We hold them accountable for their actions and we celebrate positive change . . . every single, little, tiny positive change. We tell them that we are proud of them and we are. We think about them when we go home and we brainstorm about what we need to be doing to get them back on track when they backslide and they DO backslide. That's all part of recovery!

The point for you is that RECOVERY CAN HAPPEN! I see it first-hand every day. My participants tell me that they are PROUD of themselves, for the FIRST TIME in 10 years, they are proud of who they are. They never thought they could get clean and STAY CLEAN. No way! Not until they came into this program. I have a participant who was incarcerated for many months before he came into DTC. He was released to our program and has been clean for over a year now, has his own apartment, went back to school and is now a 4.0 student.

One of my participants, Jeff, is here today to testify. I have no idea what he is going to say to you but I hope he tells you how important Drug Treatment Court has been in his recovery. If you met Jeff on the street, you would never in a million years think that he is someone in recovery. He is a classy, intelligent, well-spoken, well-educated man. You would never know how long he struggled. I am confident that, when you hear his story, you will see that addiction does not discriminate and, more importantly, RECOVERY CAN HAPPEN. It can happen if we continue to support recovery services in Pennsylvania and in Westmoreland County. I ask you to partner with us to help us save lives in our county by continuing to work with us on this issue and by increasing funding for recovery programs and services.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today and thank you for considering my experiences in your future deliberations in both the House and Senate. Thank you.

