

New court for addictions, mental health introduced

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The Ontario Court of Justice in Peterborough has quietly introduced a new court to address offenders with mental health and addiction issues.

Dubbed the Community Support Court, the new initiative has been put in place after months of behind-the-scenes planning between the judiciary, the Crown's office and a host of community organizations. "This is about stopping the revolving door, about having a holistic approach to the issues that bring people to the criminal courts," explained Crown attorney Kelly Eberhard.

"It shouldn't be seen as a magic bullet, but it is a step forward and I think it's a fantastic initiative that Peterborough is taking."

Madam Justice Lisa Cameron will preside over the court, which runs every second Friday at the Simcoe St. courthouse.

The court will be a middle ground between the regular court process and the Canadian Mental Health Association's court diversion program.

That program helps remove offenders suffering from mental health issues, and charged with relatively minor offences, out of the criminal system and into community support programs.

The new court will require an accused to plead guilty, but will take a greater holistic approach to sentencing, Eberhard explained.

"The hope is that there is going to be a consistent, holistic process," she said. "The end result that we want is to see that ... the community is protected and that recidivism decreases so that we can actually identify and address the issues which bring this person to court in the first place."

The Community Support Court will not be a free-for-all. Duty lawyers, defence counsel, community organizations and even family members can recommend an offender to the court, but that offender must be screened and accepted by a multi-disciplinary team, Eberhard said.

"There is a funneling system. We couldn't possibility deal with the thousands of cases. It would just be a nightmare," she said.

The exact makeup of that team has yet to be finalized, she said.

"The process, which we are developing as time goes on, is to have a multi disciplinary team," she said. "These are going to be cases that wouldn't normally be caught by our existing mental health diversion program."

When it comes to such an initiative, Peterborough doesn't have to reinvent the wheel. Cameron played a role in developing a mental health court in Lindsay and Oshawa currently has a court that deals with drug addiction. The Peterborough approach has taken lessons from both models, Eberhard said.

" This is a made-for- Peterborough solution," she said.