

U.S. hails mental health court

Cook County system called model for all

By Jeff Coen

Tribune staff reporter

The mental health court at the Cook County Criminal Courts Building is a good model for other efforts across the nation to steer the mentally ill away from prison and into treatment, a top federal official said Thursday.

Charles Curie, administrator of the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, visited the court Thursday morning, saying he wanted to see firsthand what elements of the effort have led to its early success as it prepares to use a federal grant to triple its capacity.

Curie sat in on conferences in the chambers of Judge Law-

rence Fox's courtroom and listened as planners, caseworkers and attorneys discussed treatment options for several defendants who have been recommended for the specialized court.

Unlike other courts of its kind, the mental health court handles not only misdemeanors but also felony cases. If that can work in a system the size of Chicago's, "it's a good sign for the rest of the country," Curie said after the session.

The mental health court in October was promised \$1.2 million over the next three years from the federal substance abuse agency. That should allow the number of people in the program at any one time to rise to between 80 and 90, from about 30 now.

About 70 percent of those who have been entered in the court have stayed in treatment

as a condition of their probation.

Many of those participants had long histories of arrests for crimes like theft and prostitution. All had diagnosed mental health problems, and most had fallen away from getting any treatment or medication for their conditions.

The new court has shown that reconnecting those defendants to treatment and making it mandatory for them in order to avoid a prison sentence is working, planners said.

The cases of 16 participants have been on the court's call for more than one year, court records show. That group had a combined 32 felony cases in the year before they arrived in the court, planners said, and they haven't had one since.

Mark Kammerer, director of treatment programs for the Cook County state's attor-

ney's office, said the new federal funds will go to hire new case managers for the court and pay for placement of more people in community treatment centers.

"If anybody had told us two years ago that this is where we'd be now, we would have jumped at it," Kammerer said. "Nobody would have guessed we'd be this successful."

The goal of the court is to break the cycle that often sees the mentally ill repeatedly commit crimes by keeping them linked to resources that can help them. Many suffer from schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or severe depression, and their condition can be improved if they have access to reliable medicine and counseling, planners of the effort say.

The Cook County state's attorney's office and public defender's office, the Cook Coun-

ty Adult Probation Department and the social service agency Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities work together to find those who qualify. Chief Judge Timothy C. Evans and Chief Criminal Court Judge Paul Biebel Jr. also have lent their support.

Participants cannot have committed any violent crimes. They must follow the terms of their probation or face the same sentence they would have in the normal court flow.

Curie listened Thursday as case manager Pam Ewing described how several court participants are doing as case-workers have helped them stay in treatment.

"I'm really pleased to see they are taking a multidisciplinary approach in terms of looking at all aspects of a person's life," Curie said.

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