



Drug treatment court celebrates a graduation

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The Provincial Court's Drug Treatment Court of Vancouver (DTCV) was the second court of its kind to open in Canada. Modelled after similar courts in the US, DTCV recognized the need for a new approach to the prosecution and sentencing of drug-addicted offenders; otherwise the "revolving door" of crime would continue to plague both offenders and the community. The idea was that if drug addiction, the root cause of so much street crime, could be addressed, it should reduce criminal offending and the health consequences and deaths associated with the illegal drug trade in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

How does DTCV work? A person charged with a criminal offence who is willing to plead guilty and participate in treatment applies to enter DTCV. They are screened by experienced prosecutors and addictions experts. If accepted, they plead guilty and sentencing is put off while they undertake treatment. They are bound by strict bail conditions, including reporting to court regularly, random urine testing, and attending an intensive treatment program for at least nine months. An integrated team of probation officers, addiction counsellors, physicians, health care workers, and an employment assistance worker offer services to address the participants' complex needs, including addiction treatment, health care, psychiatric care, housing, financial assistance, life skills training, education and leisure activities.

A key component is regularly scheduled appearances before a supervising judge who reviews progress. Those who have attended all sessions and have tested "clean" for illegal drugs are placed on the "All Star" list and are eligible to win a nominal retail gift card. Those who have not met treatment goals may be sanctioned by the judge. A breach of bail can result in jail for the participant. A participant will graduate if they complete the treatment modules, and abstain from illegal drugs for at least the preceding three months; engage in secure employment, training or volunteering; live in stable, approved housing; and have not been charged with a new offence in the preceding six months.

[Improving Outcomes for Drug Addicted Offenders](#) (video)

A successful participant has a graduation ceremony in open court, witnessed by other DTCV participants and team members. The graduate receives a certificate and is sentenced to a non-custodial sentence.

At a ceremony in 2015, the graduate was praised by Judge Reginald Harris, formerly a police

officer and then a lawyer, who recalled arresting him as an offender and later representing him as defence counsel. The judge attended to speak about the graduate's thirty-year struggle with addiction and his underlying kindness and compassion. Crown Counsel said the graduate had entered DTCV early in 2014 after pleading guilty to possessing a stolen vehicle. He had spent some time in jail after an early relapse but began earning All Stars by July 2014, and his graduation in May 2015 marked the award of his 15th All Star, signifying over a year drug-free. The graduate had no new criminal charges, and because of the positive changes he had made and his compliance with strict conditions for over a year, the Crown was not seeking a jail sentence. Other speakers praised the participant's desire to learn new behaviours, his insight, hard work, and positive energy, his skills as a furniture refinisher, and his success at reconnecting with his family. His lawyer had promised to take him to dinner if he graduated and was making good on his promise.

Judge Harbans Dhillon, the presiding judge, concluded the ceremony by saying:

"I've come to the conclusion that addiction is a sly thief. It steals from you by sleight of hand. You don't know the impact at the time that you're using. But bit by bit it takes away your family. It takes away your employment opportunities. It takes away your friends. It takes away your community. And then you have to rebuild all of that. But first you have to get clean.

And for you, you took the difficult step of acknowledging that you had a problem. You worked on making a commitment to your recovery, and that's a major lifestyle change. You took part in the intense demands that this Court's program places on persons. It's not easy getting through a Drug Treatment Court. Sometimes it's easier to do time in jail, but you don't come out of it at the other end a healthy, whole and functioning individual. And for you, I'm entirely satisfied that you've put the foundation in place for your continued and sustained recovery. I am very, very proud of you, and, you know, the people that know you the best are extremely proud of you."

Seeing people change their lives for the better is one of the most rewarding experiences judges have.

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