

Depending on Dependency Drug Court



Members of the Dependency Drug Court discuss clients' cases before they come in for a status update with Commissioner Catherine Lyons. Members of the group shown here meeting recently in Dept 406 are Jennifer Pasinosky, Coordinator of Dependency Drug Court; Michele Hill, Team Manager, Dependency Drug Court; Abigail Headrick, Family Case Manager, Hamilton Transitional Housing Program; Jaime Aragon, Associate Program Director, Hamilton Family Center, Transitional Program; and Dora Miranda, MFT, a marriage and family therapist who serves as the Dependency Drug Court-appointed social worker.

Exhausted and hungry, the warmth of Department 405 served as a temporary refuge for a mother who was battling to keep her baby.

The social worker was fed up. She was ready to act immediately to protect the baby girl if “Colleen” refused to go into a residential treatment program that would allow her to stay with her baby. But it seemed the string of sleepless nights and constant daily search for the next place to eat and sleep had caught up to this stubborn mother.

“You need a place where you don’t have to worry about the next night,” Commissioner Catherine Lyons gently told Colleen. “That’s no way to be, huh? Not for you and not for the baby. We’d like to do an assessment so we can tailor services for you. I can’t tell you how important it is to get you off of the streets.”

Colleen, known to be combative and even belligerent in past sessions, was ready to surrender that day to the

help that awaited her.

“I’m tired. I’m tired. I’m so tired,” she admitted as she sat at a table with Commissioner Lyons and other team members assembled to help her and other parents. San Francisco’s Dependency Drug Court is a relatively new collaborative justice court.

Launched in November 2007, the Court operates parallel to traditional child dependency case proceedings for drug-addicted parents. The voluntary program — which lasts about 12 months — is a way for parents to receive Court-monitored treatment and services to overcome their challenges and prepare for a clean and sober future. Currently the Court serves 15 parents.

“This is a Drug Court honey,” one female client said to a friend during a February session as she waited for her turn at the table. “But this is a Drug Court for people with kids.”

Successful completion of the program could help them retain their

parental rights or reunify them with their children.

During this recent session, the range of issues facing these parents is evident as Commissioner Lyons, Jennifer Pasinosky, Coordinator of the Dependency Drug Court, Michele Hill, Team Manager, Substance Abuse Services and Dependency Drug Court, and other treatment specialists and child welfare representatives meet in advance of the formal Court session to review details of each client's current cases. The program offers a comprehensive menu of services to address each client's particular needs, including mental health, drug treatment and housing needs and job training options.

The team meets at a table below the bench, which remains unoccupied during the formal Court session at 1:30 p.m. The Commissioner sits at the table next to clients.

As the clients — many of whom know each other from homeless shelters, drug treatment admissions and jail — chat with each other and coo over several babies there that day, Commissioner Lyons calls the session to order.

Court in Session

"Our ground rules haven't changed," she tells the clients. "Give respect. Get respect. No name-calling. No cussing. And I'm looking forward to talking to you about your cases."

After Colleen agrees to undergo the assessment and enter into a residential

treatment program, she takes a seat with her baby among the women she knows who are waiting for their turn at the table.

"Got a cigarette?" she asks one woman.

Just then another mother walks in with a container of chocolate milk and Colleen reaches to the woman for a sip from the plastic bottle. Minutes later, with the baby precariously cradled in her lap, Colleen's head starts to bob downward as she falls asleep sitting up.

It doesn't take long for Commissioner Lyons to notice as she speaks with another client. "Colleen — do you need help holding that baby?"

The exhausted mother wakes up, smiles weakly and does her best to fend off the sleep her body craves.

Compassion is Abundant

Compassionate listening is a trademark of Commissioner Lyons' approach to justice in her courtroom. During this session, a mother who has not been allowed to see her baby for several months presents Commissioner Lyons with a video of the infant on her mobile phone — which despite its considerable length — she watches with a broad smile as the woman describes to a social worker her eviction problems.

But despite those genuine moments of compassion, the hammer will fall when a client repeatedly shirks responsibility or fails to complete a requirement for successful participation in the program.

Won't take 'No' for an Answer

That day, there seemed to be an inexplicable aversion among several clients to attend an Expressive Arts program.

One couple explains the logistical problems they had trying to find their way to couple's counseling. The wife said she couldn't attend Expressive Arts because of a conflict with a group session on Monday nights.

"You need to do Expressive Arts. That's part of everybody's plan. That's just the way it is. You could do two things in one day."

A newly married couple comes before Commissioner Lyons, who offers some niceties before getting to the heart of their individual issues.

"How was your last couple of weeks since I've seen you last?" she asks.

The father describes the difficulty he is having dealing with stress.

"What do you do to relieve your stress?" she asks.

Then she launches into an area of inquiry that cuts to the heart of one of his main issues: his need for steady employment to support his family.

"What else do you see yourself doing?" she asks him.

"There's a lot of things I can do," he answers.

"I bet," she responds. "Is your resume up-to-date?"

She suggests that he research possible certifications he could pursue to enhance his job qualifications. His wife patiently listens as she leans her head on her left hand, and fidgets with her scarf.

"There's a reason why I'm asking you all these questions," Commissioner Lyons says. "I want to push you a little harder on this job thing. I think you can handle more than a security job. You're somebody that needs a little more encouragement."

He responds that obtaining job training is stressful — and she again acknowledges that difficulty, but adds, "I want you to really start checking into this. I don't like to take 'no' for an answer. If I did that, I would be out of business." ⚖️



Jennifer Pasinosky, Coordinator of the Dependency Drug Court, Michele Hill, Team Manager, Substance Abuse Services and Dependency Drug Court, Dora Miranda, MFT, a Court-appointed social worker and Commissioner Catherine Lyons consult on cases before the formal Tuesday session of Dependency Drug Court.

Editor's Note: The names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.