



SAFESTREETS

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Mental Health Alternatives Program helps break the jail cycle

EVERETT - Two years ago, Lisa was facing a year in jail after being arrested for shoplifting for the seventh time in three years. With a 7-year-old daughter in her care, Lisa was desperate to find an alternative to jail, and turned to her public defender for help.

“Sitting in jail doesn’t help somebody with mental health problems,” Lisa says. “I needed to be there for my daughter, and I had the willingness to work on myself.”

Lisa’s public defender, Laura Baird, approached City prosecutor Hil Kaman with her client’s dilemma. At the time, the Municipal Court had not officially started their [Mental Health Alternatives Program \(MAP\)](#), formerly known as the Community Justice Alternatives program, but the team had begun talking about alternative sentencing programs for individuals who were open to treatment and addressing the issues that can contribute to criminal activity.

“Lisa is one of the reasons we have this program,” says Judge Laura Van Slyck. Van Slyck provides judicial oversight for MAP, which is part of a growing number of therapeutic court programs throughout the state. Based on the recommendations of the MAP team, the judge sets individualized conditions for each participant, such as meeting with a case manager or treatment provider, submitting to drug or alcohol testing, securing a better living environment or working toward a stable job.

The court establishes sanctions or incentives to manage progress through the program and closely monitors each participant’s compliance with treatment and services in the community. The goal is to reduce repeated criminal activity and break the cycle of arrest and release. Participants who successfully complete the program may ultimately have their charges dropped. Nine participants have graduated since the program began in mid-2013, and there are currently 19 active participants.

Shedding light on difficult issues

For Lisa, participating in MAP brought her issues out into the open. She didn’t understand why she continued to steal, but she knew she needed to figure it out, and the program provided a

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space to do that.

“Confidentiality is waived,” says Baird. “We are very candid, and that can be embarrassing at first. But we have to do it to get to the root causes of the issues the participants are dealing with.”

Lisa agrees that the openness took some getting used to, but says that it’s humanizing to have the court actively involved in each person’s treatment plan.

“To have a judge talk to us and not yell at us” made a huge difference, says Lisa.

After nearly a year in the program, Lisa faced a setback when she was caught stealing and came back before the court facing new charges. Though it was hard, knowing that she was accountable to the court team helped motivate Lisa to get back on track.

"I saw the disappointment on everybody's faces," Lisa said. "This court is harder than regular court; everyone knows when you screw up."

Ultimately, Lisa says, a theft awareness class helped her see the effects that stealing from a store has on the rest of the community. She had previously considered shoplifting a “victimless” crime. She also learned a lot by researching and writing a required essay about kleptomania.

Looking to the future

Lisa says participating in the program helped her develop the strategies she’ll need to keep herself out of trouble going forward.

“[Kleptomania] is embarrassing, so sometimes I isolate myself,” Lisa says. “Now I know I have to make it known to the people around me to hold me accountable.” As she continues on her path of recovery, Lisa plans to keep going to church, participating in support groups and Narcotics Anonymous, and reading up on her condition.

At her MAP graduation ceremony this fall, Lisa was surrounded by the team that helped her get to this point, including Baird, Van Slyck, Kaman and the MAP liaison. Calling her a “charter member,” Van Slyck congratulated Lisa for working so hard for the past two years.

And although many graduates who complete the program often finish sooner than the two-year mark, Lisa was told to not be ashamed of the time it took, but instead, to be proud of where she is.

Lisa said it best: "For the people who stick with it, it actually works."

Learn more: Judge Van Slyck will provide a MAP update to the [City Council](#) on Wednesday, Nov. 25, at 12:30 p.m. You can also [learn more on our website](#).

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