

This court takes a different approach

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HIGH POINT - Oftentimes, when a defendant stands before a judge in the Guilford County Courthouse in High Point, the news is not good for the person on the receiving end.

But on a recent morning, Guilford County District Court Judge Tom Jarrell offered words of congratulations and encouragement to several people in his courtroom.

"How are you doing? You feeling good?" the judge asked one man undergoing treatment for cocaine addiction. With almost a month clean, he reported his life was moving on the right track.

"That's something really special, and we're all proud of you," Jarrell told him, and everyone in the courtroom applauded.

The exchange occurred during a session of the Guilford County Mental Health Treatment Court, which was established in High Point last year as an alternative to the criminal justice system for non-violent individuals charged with a crime who have a mental illness. Instead of incarceration, the court focuses on treating the illness and providing intense supervision over a period of several months. In some cases, if defendants comply with the court's conditions, they can have their charges dismissed.

Jarrell, a 10-year veteran of the bench from High Point, calls it "the best court we have ever had, as far as changing people's lives."

"We take folks who have struggled with addiction and struggled with mental health problems and have not received treatment," said Jarrell, who oversees the High Point court. "They're in their 30s, most of them. Their whole life, they've been substance abusers, alcohol abusers and have never had the mental health treatment that they deserve."

The court was launched in High Point in April 2008, six months after it was established in Greensboro. It's similar to the county's drug courts, which also emphasize treatment over jail time. In both programs, known as specialty courts, a group that includes the presiding judge, prosecutor, public defender, probation officer and case manager meet regularly to monitor defendants' progress.

Clients in the mental health court must submit to random drug tests, come to court twice a month, attend probation appointments and work with a case manager to find treatment, such as substance abuse counseling, psychiatric services or therapy.

It takes at least six months to complete the program and defendants generally face a probation term that continues once they've graduated from the court. The High Point program, which can accommodate up to 25 clients, now has 15 people enrolled. So far, it's produced seven graduates, with three more set to finish this month. None of the graduates have re-offended.

"The results have certainly been promising. I think we're impacting recidivism," said Jon Bellows, trial court



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Judge Tom Jarrell addresses defendants in Guilford County's Mental Health Treatment Court session in High Point.

administrator for the state's 18th Judicial District, which is Guilford County. "If we can get them in the program, get them compliant on their (medications), get them seeing their treatment providers, help them with any other issues they may have like housing or those sorts of things, we really think we can have a long impact and hopefully keep them out of jail, which saves a lot of money."