

State grant to fund county court for drunken drivers

By Lydia Statz, Daily Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, February 6, 2014 9:32 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County has been awarded state grant money to establish an alcohol treatment court.

The award, part of the state's Treatment Alternatives and Diversion Program, is used by counties to establish program to address non-violent offenders at a higher risk of reoffending.

In Jefferson County, \$112,000 will be used to establish the Jefferson County Alcohol Treatment Court to guide repeat drunken-driving offenders toward treatment in order to reduce the number of repeat offenders.

“The whole point is that we hope to see these people not coming back and not to re-offend, which increases public safety,” said Jefferson County District Attorney Susan Happ.

The program, announced by the state Attorney General's Office, will target non-violent offenders charged with their third- through sixth drunken driving offense, and will offer intensive treatment options prior to their conviction in hope of changing their recurrent behavior.

“People, when they got their second offense, went to jail, they didn't learn; now we need to try to work on behavior modification,” Happ explained. “Because whatever happened when they got their second offense, it didn't work, so now we need to say, ‘Hey, what can we do differently?’”

A total of 109 third-offense or greater OWI convictions occurred in Jefferson County in 2012. Once the program is established, about 40 of these offenders each year will be eligible to participate in the alcohol treatment court.

Though many of the program's details still are to be finalized, offenders who choose to participate will work with case managers, be intensively monitored by the county's judges, be subjected to random alcohol testing, and attend individualized treatment sessions as they work through the program's phases.

Successful offenders will “graduate” from the program.

They will serve less time in jail than those who have not completed the program, although Happ stressed that offenders still will be convicted of OWIs, and that the county's emphasis is on preserving the public safety.

“They will go out on probation once they’re convicted, so they have supervision in the community, but we’re trying to get treatment prior to conviction because there’s a direct correlation in the research between that type of treatment and reduced re-offense,” she said. “So our goal is to get those multiple offenders to stop repeating.”

According to the grant application, the goal of the program would be for an offender to “graduate” from the court within 12 to 14 months. The program’s stated goal will be to graduate 66 percent of all who enter the treatment court, and to measurably reduce the number of citizens being arrested for a fourth or greater drunken-driving offense.

Happ also said that her office will retain discretion over who will be admitted into the program, and will scrutinize each offender to ensure he or she is a suitable candidate.

The award amount is the full sum for which the county applied. Happ said Jefferson County was one of the counties fortunate enough to garner full funding.

The \$112,714 of state funding will be augmented by \$38,255 in county funds to set the program’s first-year budget at \$150,969. The grant money will help pay for 1.5 full-time-equivalent case managers, drug-testing supplies for the program participants and other program expenses.

Similar alcohol-treatment courts have gained popularity around the state in recent years as law enforcement officials search for ways to lower the state’s drunken-driving rate.

“They’re popular, in part because the state and governments are recognizing that we have to invest in treating it if we have to get people to change their behaviors,” Happ said.

The attorney general noted that Jefferson County was among 13 counties receiving grants, including Dodge and Walworth counties.

Waushara, Columbia and Lac du Flambeau counties also received funds to set up drug-treatment courts.

A 15-member review panel selected the projects from among 36 applicants for the latest round of funding offered.

“These programs have a proven track record of reducing recidivism, making good use of public dollars and meeting the needs of offenders while ensuring accountability,” Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen said. “I’m pleased I was able to work with lawmakers to improve public safety in this manner.”