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## Mental courts get DCF grants

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Mental health courts in Martin and St. Lucie counties will receive more than \$300,000 this week in planning and operation grants from the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Court coordinators say the extra money - \$100,000 for planning in Martin and \$229,000 a year for the next three years for operations in St. Lucie County - will help develop the programs designed to keep mentally ill defendants of nonviolent crimes out of jail environments that often are ill-equipped to care for their illnesses.

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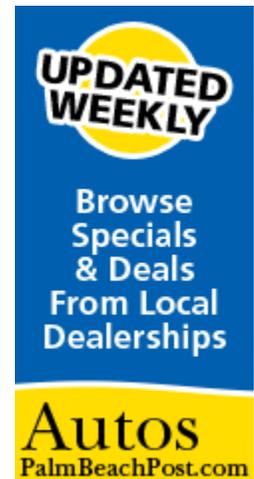
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County Health and Human Services. "Hopefully a grant like this will help us take the baby steps that will eventually put us at the head of the class."

Martin County's mental health court, which began in October with a handful of defendants, now has a docket of nearly two dozen cases. It will use the grant money to study mental health courts in other parts of the state, run public service advertisements about the court on local television and craft a plan that will accommodate the growth of the court, Cocoves said.

Coordinators in Martin say they have benefitted from the experience of watching St. Lucie County's mental health court grow rapidly since its first session in June 2006. The St. Lucie Court was the first of its kind in the 19th judicial circuit, which covers Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River and Okeechobee counties.

The courts in both counties work the same: Members are defendants charged mostly with misdemeanors who are released from jail and must undergo either inpatient or outpatient mental health treatment after defense attorneys, prosecutors and victims, if there are any, agree with the mental health court as a treatment option.



When candidates complete the program, their cases are dropped.

Assistant Public Defender Katie Alonzo said the money St. Lucie received, which will amount to more than \$688,000 during the next three years, will fund every request that she, Marie Glanville and Lisa Fonteyn from the public defender's office had asked for in their grant proposal.

Among the changes, coordinators will be able to hire two new case managers, train more law enforcement officers on how to deal with mentally ill people they arrest and allow two people recovering from mental illnesses to work as peer counselors.

One aspect Alonzo thinks is especially helpful is the roughly \$15,000 set aside a year for incidentals. That money will be used to help mental health court candidates with housing, transportation and clothing, Alonzo said.

"It'll be things like a bus ticket to California or a pair of work boots for a job," she said. "You'd be surprised how much an amount like \$50 for something they need will help. Sometimes it makes all the difference."

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