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Contact:

Hanna M. Greer, 462-5848

Brittany A. Thompson, 462-3354

John P. Ivanic, 645-6798

New specialty docket to increase court efficiency and cost savings for residents

Today, the Franklin County Commissioners, Columbus City Councilwoman Eileen Paley, Franklin County Municipal Court Judge Scott D. VanDerKarr and the Franklin County Sheriff's Office announced an initiative to make neighborhoods safer, help non violent offenders overcome addiction to drugs or alcohol, and reduce jail costs.

The collaborative effort among the Board of Commissioners, the City of Columbus, the Common Pleas and Municipal Courts, the Franklin County Prosecutors Office, the Public Defenders Office, the Franklin County Sheriff's office and ADAMH will establish two specialty dockets in the Municipal Court; the Solicitation Program and the Addiction Program.

Persons appearing before the court will have the opportunity to seek treatment services as their case is presented for resolution.

The specialty dockets will help ensure that an adequate treatment response is accessible to non-violent defendants exhibiting histories of alcohol, chemical dependence or solicitation.

The goal of the programs is to provide fair and consistent treatment options to solicitation or drug offenders who have a history of alcohol or chemical dependency.

"It is anticipated that implementation of these two innovative dockets will help to reduce the "revolving door" cycle of defendants with significant addiction histories. This will result in cost-savings to Franklin County and the City of Columbus by expediting court proceedings and reducing pre-trial incarcerations. It will enable the criminal justice system to intervene in a way that can help redirect individuals before their initial crimes lead to a career of crime", said Municipal Court Judge Scott VanDerKarr

During Tuesday's General Session meeting, Franklin County Commissioners approved \$95,000 in appropriations for first year funding for the pilot program. Commissioners will increase funding to \$125,000 for the 2nd year and \$175,000 for the 3rd year of the program. Other funding will be provided by fees charged by the Common Pleas Court, and allocations from ADAMH and the County Prosecutors' Office.

"This is a proactive approach to break the cycle of criminal behavior and keep the public safe. These specialty programs will provide an alternative to traditional sentencing, and their success will allow police departments to concentrate efforts on more dangerous and chronic offenders,"

said Commissioner Paula Brooks. “Reducing the burden on community resources is extremely important during these difficult economic times when, more than ever, resources are at a premium. I applaud all team members for working together.”

“This collaboration among local governments, law enforcement and our justice system provides people with the opportunity to contribute to society by leading healthy and productive lives. The programs will reduce jail population, save taxpayer money and make our communities stronger and safer,” said Commissioner Marilyn Brown.

“We know how important it is that people with substance abuse problems have their needs properly addressed. These programs help people get the treatment they need, which is the first step to recovery,” said Commissioner John O’Grady.

The Changing Actions To Change Habits (CATCH Program) is a solicitation program intended to promote effective treatment as an alternative to incarceration for a person whose multiple solicitation arrests, summons and charges have negatively impacted the person's quality of life and community safety.

Up to 50 defendants will be accepted into the CATCH program annually.

Columbus City Council approved a \$100,000 transfer from the hotel/motel excise tax to the Municipal Court for the implementation of the programs.

“The city’s participation in helping launch these specialty dockets is a wise investment,” said Columbus City Councilmember Paley, chair of the Judiciary and Court Administration Committee. “By providing an alternative to incarceration through an intensive, court-supervised environment that addresses criminal activity and helps offenders become productive members of society, we will be saving city tax dollars and helping change lives.”

The Addiction Program Specialty Docket (APSD) is intended to promote effective treatment as an alternative to incarceration for a person whose arrests, summons and charges are associated with alcohol and/or chemical dependence.

It is estimated an average of 1,500 cases will be transferred annually from the Common Pleas Court to the Municipal Court. The processing of these cases under the APSD program will reduce the average length of jail stay while awaiting court proceedings and will result in appropriate treatment referrals.