LOCALNEWS

Drug court educates, helps

BY SPENSER BICKETT
Staff Writer

More than 50 people turned out at Smokey Bear Park on Friday the 13th to learn about the real-life horrors of prescription drug abuse at an event put on by the Borderland Substance Abuse Court.

The event followed up a prescription drug drop-off event which took place earlier in the day, also sponsored by the drug court. The goal of raising awareness about the dangers of prescription drug abuse were discussed by speakers during the event.

Cotton candy and popcorn, as well as sloppy joes, were provided at the prescription drug abuse event for hungry attendees.

District Court Judge Charles LeDuc works with the drug court program in the Falls, and he talked about the birth of the drug court program under former Attorney General Janet Reno. The main tenets of the program, he said, were not criminalizing drug addicts, and treating them like people.

"The program combined the power of the court with the compassion of the treatment community to create a non-adversarial process that's designed for the welfare of the participants," he said.

The two biggest addictions the court is seeing now are alcohol and prescription drugs, LeDuc said. One reason for this growth in prescription drug abuse is actually "law-abiding folks," he said.

"When people don't get rid of their old prescriptions, it can be easy for those drugs to fall into the hands of an addict," he said.

Kevin Evenson, director of the Minnesota Department of Human Services' Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division, also talked about the growing dangers of prescription drug abuse. In Minnesota, he said the prescription drug users have been switching to heroin, which is very pure and cheap in Minnesota.

He also explained fighting drug addiction isn't a solo effort.

"It takes a community effort to battle drug addiction," he said. "We also need to remember to individualize the treatment and listen to the addict."

He praised programs like the drug court that foster community cooperation to fight drug abuse.

"Community coalitions that get together and talk about the problem, and grassroots groups are important," he said.

District Court Judge Charles LeDuc speaks at the substance abuse court event about the evolution of the drug problem in International Falls.

Gus Christianson, owner of Rainy River Recovery, talked about the unique problems prescription drugs have that make kicking addiction hard.

STAFF PHOTOS BY SPENSER BICKETT

Charity Briggs, a volunteer with the Borderland Substance Abuse Court, styles hair for a young girl at the prescription drug abuse event on Friday at Smokey Bear Park.

"Prescription addicts are the most difficult to deal with," he said. "The drugs are highly addictive and withdrawl is difficult. The cravings come out of nowhere, so long-term sobriety is tough to obtain."

The digital age has also made it easier for addicts to get hold of the drugs they need, he said.

"You've got to lock your medications down," he said. "The Internet has opened a pharmacy that's open to anyone."

The local drug court began in the planning stages in 2003, LeDuc said, and officially started in 2005. In the program's eight years, he said 100 people have gone through and graduated, which has saved "countless dollars" compared to the cost of prison.

Those graduates have praised the program upon graduation, though LeDuc said they only have one person to thank.

"The people you have to thank are yourselves," he said. "You turned your lives around."

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