

# Bill reduces sentences for drug offenders

## Savings goes to drug courts, prison system

By Jana Hill

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Only one person graduated from adult drug court in Snohomish County this time, but that individual may be the first of many.

The state Legislature is considering a bill that would divert funds usually spent to incarcerate non-violent drug offenders to pay for drug courts.

"I fully expect it to pass," said Rep. Ruth Kagi, D-Shoreline, who sponsored the bill.

The Drug Sentencing Reform bill, HB 2338, would allocate \$100,000 next year, \$650,000 in 2004 and \$8.5 million in the next biennium. "And it goes up from there," Kagi said. The funding splits with 25 percent going to the Department of Corrections and 75 percent to existing drug courts.

Funding from that bill

comes not from new taxes, but from reducing the penalties for non-violent drug offenses and replacing them with the less expensive method of drug court programs.

Kagi said the bill "gives us an opportunity to build a really good treatment system."

Kagi said she expects the bill to pass on Tuesday or Wednesday, after deadline for the Enterprise.

The bill takes steps to undo what a previous law did - filling up prisons with people who, according to their offenses, are only a danger to themselves, Kagi said.

"When we passed the omnibus drug bill 12 or 13 years ago we greatly increased sentences," Kagi said. "Twenty-five percent of Washington state's prison population is non-violent drug offenders."

Snohomish, King and Skagit counties have drug

courts. If participants complete a drug treatment program, stay clean and become employed for a predetermined amount of time, they get a chance to start over with a clean record. While in drug court, they are carefully monitored. If they do not cooperate with the program, they can spend time in jail as a sanction.

In their two years of assigning drug treatment court "clients" to rehabilitation programs, educational pursuits and job searches, "we've saved a half a million dollars," said Coral Christenson, drug treatment court coordinator for Snohomish County.

Recidivism rates - which would tell how many drug court clients were rearrested after completing their year-long program - are not yet available from Snohomish County's drug court because money for that research is not available, Christenson said.

A 1998 study found that one year following drug court involvement, 9 percent of drug court graduates had new felony charges while 25 percent of those who declined or failed the program had new felony charges, according to figures from King County's Drug Diversion program.

In Snohomish County,

adult drug court participants face Judge Richard Thorpe daily, do at least three 12-step meetings a week, and three treatment sessions a week. They also are tested for substances three to five times a week, Thorpe said.

Most come in unemployed, and "they kind of look beaten down. They feel like no one loved them for years, and maybe they didn't," Thorpe said. The adult court has graduated 42 people so far, he said. When graduates start the program, it seems overwhelming. But when they finish it, they have a new situation to live in.

"The biggest thing really is how these people really rebuild their lives," Thorpe said - "how they come out of the program an entirely different person."

Thorpe speaks proudly of the adult drug court's successes, with the underlying message that lives that would have been lessened by drug problems became less complicated due to drug court.

"We've had two or three clean babies born. The babies are born clean because their moms were," Thorpe said.

Thorpe is looking forward to passage of the Sentencing Reform bill. Snohomish County's drug court has one year left on a federal grant. In the mean time, they're looking for other sources of funding.