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Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition enjoys learning at lunch



This slide shows some of the possible obstacles to a faith-based partnership for an anti-drug coalition. Dixie County appears to have overcome those hurdles thus far.

By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 25, 2018 at 7:47 p.m.

CROSS CITY -- About 50 people enjoyed a delicious lunch and learned that the 7-year-old the Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition is succeeding in its efforts during a Lunch and Learn event on Tuesday afternoon at the Dixie County Public Library in Cross City.

The recently improved library kitchen that is part of the large community meeting room served well for the catered lunch provided by Laura Fowler Goss, food designer.

Goss has created a business where she will deliver ready-to-eat meals to families at home, which is seen as a method to improve the chances for parents to speak with their children at the dinner tables.



Amy Ronshausen, the deputy director of the Drug Free America Foundation based in St. Petersburg, was the keynote speaker at the event Tuesday. *Photo By Jeff M. Hardison*

Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Executive Director Katrina VanAernam promised delicious food for lunch and an informative program for the learning part of the hour and a half event, and that is what was delivered.

Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Community Engagement Coordinator Rebecca Fusco, Information Coordinator Debbie Sweem and Coalition Administration Coordinator Cale McCall

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were staff members present to assist.

Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition President Buddy Schofield, Secretary Melody LaFlam and other board members Nancy Osteen and Hattie Johnson were among the many other coalition leaders and volunteers present for the event.

Representatives of Another Way; the Florida Department of Corrections; the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice; school system leaders -- including Dixie County Superintendent of Schools Mike Thomas; emergency services leaders -- including Dixie County Emergency Services Director Chief Darian Brown; representatives of the Florida Department of Health -- including Angie Land; and several church leaders were among the long list of attendees.

There were also some individuals present who shared that they are recovering alcoholics or recovering addicts of other drugs.

Everyone was welcomed with a warm showing of love and respect.

Executive Director VanAernam spoke a little bit about Overcomers Outreach, a non-profit group that helps people overcome addictions. About Friendship Chapel Church of God Associate Pastor Davy Cannon is a leader of Overcomers.

This is a ministry from Steinhatchee on the Taylor County side of the river, VanAernam said.

There are no known Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings in Dixie County, VanAernam said. Overcomers Outreach provides meetings in Perry, Steinhatchee and in Old Town, she said.

Preventing drug abuse and reducing substance abuse are the primary missions of the Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition.

Amy Ronshausen, the deputy director of the Drug Free America Foundation based in St. Petersburg, was the keynote speaker at the event Tuesday.

Ronshausen said the Drug Free America Foundation is a national and international group that focuses on drug prevention and drug policy.

Among the points where the Drug Free America Foundation is involved internationally is an annual trip to Vienna, Switzerland, to confer with countries that are part of the United Nations in regard to plans in eight-year segments concerning how the world is dealing with drug problems.

"Every country has the same problems," she said.

After the broad range of people and groups represented at the meeting introduced themselves, Ronshausen said she was very impressed. While there were about 50 people in Cross City, Ronshausen said she has seen as few as 15 people at big metropolitan coalitions.

The faith-based community, she said, is often lacking in a coalition, but the group in Dixie County is strong.

She mentioned that in Pinellas County, there are Scientologists and other faiths that are not Protestant or Catholic. She reminded everyone that if the coalition is seeking to prevent drug abuse, people of different beliefs can work together.

Being from a Presbyterian background, she said her family went to the church for help when her sister became involved with drugs. The church leader they sought for counseling the family was ill-equipped and may have done more harm than good.

Helping religious leaders become willing to acknowledge drug abuse as a problem, and aiding them in learning best practices for counseling addicts is a goal for people who want to mount a community-wide effort to prevent drug abuse.

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Ronshausen covered many topics related to methods for communities to work as one to reduce drug abuse too.



Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Executive Director Katrina VanAernam welcomes Jeff Hardison as a member of the board for the group.

Photo by Arthur Bellot

Drug court is a topic that Ronshausen mentioned.

In the Sixth Judicial Circuit of Florida, which includes Pinellas County and Pasco County, Ronshausen spoke about success in Pinellas County with drug courts.

By separating suspected drug law offenders from the other sets of suspected criminals, many lawmakers are seeing better success rates in reducing recidivism.

To have a drug court initiated in a judicial circuit in Florida, she said, the people need to ask their state attorney, their county commissioners, their state legislators and their judges to begin the work.

Dixie County is part of the Third Judicial Circuit. The counties of the Third Circuit are Columbia, Dixie, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee and Taylor counties.

Third Judicial Circuit State Attorney Jeff Siegmeister is the state attorney for this circuit.

Dixie County Judge Jennifer Johnson, VanAernam said, has mentioned being in favor of a drug court before.

The neighboring circuit – the Eighth Judicial Circuit – includes the following counties Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, and Union counties.

Eighth Judicial Circuit State Attorney William Cervone is the state attorney for this circuit.

There are 20 circuits for the 67 counties of Florida.

As of April 2017, according to the Florida Courts website, Florida has 95 drug courts in operation, including 46 adult felony, 7 adult misdemeanor, 22 juvenile, 16 family dependency, and 4 DUI courts.

The components of drug courts, according to the Florida Courts website, from Florida Statutes 397.334 are:

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- Integration of alcohol and other drug treatment services into justice system case processing

- Non-adversarial approach
- Early identification of eligible participants
- Continuum of services
- Alcohol and drug testing for abstinence
- Coordinated strategy for responses to participants' compliance
- Ongoing judicial interaction
- Monitoring and evaluation for program effectiveness
- Interdisciplinary education
- Partnerships with stakeholders

In speaking about drug court, Ronshausen said this is a method for suspects to not go to prison.

As for people who commit violent crimes or who are drug traffickers, drug court is not an option, Ronshausen said.

“The state attorney is the gatekeeper for drug courts,” Ronshausen said. “They determine who is appropriate (as a candidate for this method) and who is not.”

Even then, she added, it is the individual's choice. She has seen defendants go to the podium and opt for prison rather than the drug court program.

She finds this interesting, because usually the added conditions of probation after prison include the same requirements the people may think they are avoiding by not accepting drug court methods.

In Pinellas County, she said, drug court is a two-year program. In the first year, the participant completes certain aspects of the program. In the second year, the person appears each six weeks before a judge, Ronshausen said.

Celebrations are part of the drug court program, she said.

Participants celebrate drug-free babies; the completion of a Graduation Equivalency Diploma; the reunification of families; and other positive aspects of life that result after staying away from drugs.

“A lot of the people in drug courts have never been clapped for before,” Ronshausen said. “They've never before had a room full of people clapping for them because they completed their GED or because they got their driver's license back.”

By being part of the drug court community, people help provide support for one another to choose against returning to drugs.

People on probation go through some of the same procedures she said, but they lack the support of visiting with a judge regularly and being part of a group of defendants who are all striving to overcome the behavior of breaking drug laws.

Among the many aspects of drug court Ronshausen discussed was the difference between the individuals forced to enter it in contrast with the defendants who chose it.

She said the person who was forced to take the drug court route showed the same positive outcome of becoming drug free. Seventy-five percent of people who complete the course are not arrested within the next two years, Ronshausen said.

Longer studies show reduction in criminal behavior lasts from between three and 14 years, and longer.

“Drug courts significantly reduce crime by as much as 45 percent more than other sentencing options,” Ronshausen said.

Success is affected by people changing the people they network with. If a person

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returns to the same people and places, and begins doing the same things that led them to break drug laws before, she said, that can lead to a stronger likelihood of returning to the justice system as a defendant.

Ronshausen said society saves money by the success shown in drug courts as an option. There is a reduction in costs to the health system as well as to the detention system.

According to the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, in 2007, for every \$1 of federal funds invested in drug court, \$9 was leveraged in state funding to benefit the taxpayers.