

## Serving the Community: The 54B District Court Drug Court

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### Community Need

Few things are more tragic than the deaths and ravaged communities that stem from drug addiction. Drugs are widely recognized as one of the leading causes of accidental death in this country. Fatal overdoses surpassed shooting deaths and traffic accidents several years ago, according to numbers from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention as well as a 2015 study authored by Dr. Holly Hedegaard of the National Center for Health Statistics.

Prescription and illegal opioids are commonly abused because they are so addictive. Opioids bind to the areas of the brain that control pain and emotions, driving up levels of the feel-good hormone dopamine in the brain’s reward area and producing a very intense feeling of euphoria. The equally intense craving to match the first high is colloquially described as “chasing the dragon.” Drug deaths have disproportionately hit small towns and rural America. However, no demographic is immune from the devastating effects of drug addiction.

Drug courts are typically designed to offer immediate treatment to non-violent offenders for substance abuse, along with drug testing and judicial supervision, with the purpose of promoting a healthy lifestyle. This article will focus on the 54B District Court Drug Court. Additionally, it will provide an overview of relevant areas addressed during an all-access discussion with the two women at its helm.

### **Long Term Sustainability**

Judge Andrea A. Larkin and probation officer Amy Iseler played an integral role in establishing what is currently Ingham County’s only drug court. Their combined experience with Sobriety Court, which focuses on helping those who have been convicted of alcohol-related driving offenses, served as the springboard for the drug court. Judge Larkin did not hesitate when asked to explain why anyone who is eligible should even consider participating in the specialty court. She said, “Getting your life back” is the biggest incentive.

Iseler explained that the focus when people enter the court is often on instant gratification to a disease – addiction. Frequently, the focus shifts during the course of probation. Judge Larkin and Iseler both agree that long term sustainability is their primary goal. There’s no finish line with a reward to be collected at the end. Iseler emphasized that “successful discharge is nice, but sustainability is [our] true goal.”

### **Early Days Yet**

A State Court Administrative Office grant fund made the drug court possible. The first participant entered the program in December 2016. Back then, she was so narrowly focused on getting the drug that the question constantly at the forefront of her mind was who she could use to get the next dose. Now, she’s focused on her PTSD, grief counseling, and she looks about five years younger in just two and a half months, according to Iseler. Her spouse has been to a few meetings at the courthouse. Fortunately, her entire family supports her in the quest to achieve long-term sobriety.

### **High Risk Group**

Iseler posited that the drug court population is a “high risk” group. When pressed for details, Iseler explained that drug use requires a lot of criminogenic behavior to obtain the drug of choice.

The emotion was palpable when Iseler shared that a lot of clients who overdose are found in public areas. Judge Larkin pointed out that three Grand Rapids citizens were found overdosing in a car fewer than 24 hours before the instant discussion. Sadly, one of them died.

Iseler attends Families Against Narcotics (FAN) meetings regularly. She was struck by the breadth of how the disease affects the lives of others at the first meeting that she attended. It came as no surprise to hear spouses and parents lament the struggles of their loved ones. However, it was the stories of the grandparents caring for their grandchildren that really struck a chord with Iseler.

Phil Pavonna is a mainstay at FAN meetings. He also visits, at home or even in the county jail, with young men and women who are in varying stages of their battle with drug addiction. Iseler speaks with him a few times a week. Pavonna joined a club no parent wants to be a member of when he lost a child to a drug overdose. Parents go to him regularly because he has made it his life's mission to prevent more senseless deaths by sharing his own experience. He also provides invaluable emotional support to those who have done what is arguably the most unnatural thing for a parent – buried a child!

### **Removing Barriers**

One of the drug court's two peer mentors just got access to the Ingham County Jail (ICJ). Both successfully completed a 40-hour training course at Wellness, Inc. They also submitted to criminal background checks and interviewed with Iseler before they were approved as mentors. This lady and gentleman are both in long term recovery. The gentleman knows resources in the community because he has gone through many of the local programs. These peer mentors are allies who understand recovery and what it takes to get through the program. Both mentors have full-time jobs and volunteer their time to the drug court.

Peer mentors are just one example of how Judge Larkin and Iseler took action to remove barriers. The drug court pays for treatment, counseling, mental health, and healthcare, and the court has partnered with local clinics to provide Methadone or Suboxone to those who need it. Despite all these tools, both Iseler and the judge recognize that they cannot guarantee participants their sobriety. Iseler's constant charge to participants is to go and grab their sobriety.

### **Staying Motivated**

Judge Larkin and Iseler agree that working with such a high risk group can be mentally and emotionally taxing. Therefore, their coping mechanisms and ability to stay motivated seemed like the next logical topic. Judge Larkin makes a conscious, consistent effort to avoid decision fatigue by educating herself and staying abreast of developments on the topic.

Iseler’s experiences in the private sector convinced her that their goal is achievable. She worked with the population that this court was created to serve for many years before she started at 54B. Nothing brings her greater joy or motivates her more than attending a graduation and seeing former clients who have managed to obtain and maintain their recovery. She counts each graduate as a life saved and that is always a high note for the rest of the week.

This, the fledgling stage, is the toughest part. Iseler added that the participants are in “crisis state” right now because the program is so new. The drug court is now offering an opportunity that previously didn’t exist.

Never one to sit idle, Iseler was scheduled to attend a seminar in Florida a few weeks after we all met. She joined forces and presented on a panel with people in long term recovery.

### **Eligibility and Resources**

Six people have signed the drug court’s waiver of agreement. The court has budgeted for thirty participants. Iseler met with two who are eligible at the ICJ the day before we met. She asked three primary questions. Are you eligible? Do you want to? Finally, do we want you? DSM V – severe diagnosis based on addiction to opioids, stimulants, or benzodiazepines – is the requisite level of need. That is the most time consuming and under-served population.

The 54B District Court receives no pecuniary benefits for running the county’s inaugural drug court. The grant does not provide for a paid intern or additional salary for Judge Larkin

and Iseler. All the grant money is spent on participants. Iseler quipped that the drug court is truly a labor of love. She maintains her regular caseload and has assumed responsibility for the Ingham County Veterans' Treatment Court. The drug court convenes at 1:00 pm on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of every month. Rather than mere supervision, Iseler describes her role in the drug court as case management in its truest sense.

Participants can contact Iseler whenever the need arises. However, the program strives to provide participants with enough resources so that they don't become dependent on any one person or agency. Because of their level of need, the program's participants receive priority when it comes to taking calls or staying at work late.

### **Mutual Benefit**

Judge Larkin's continuing involvement with Sobriety Court has been helpful in shaping her expectations for the drug court. She was very clear that the populations are not identical. What keeps her going is when someone stands at the podium and talks about a major change in life and the aura of pride that typically results. No names were revealed but Judge Larkin was inspired by people who have secured a first job, reestablished a relationship with parents or kids, or bought a first house after being on the brink of bankruptcy. Doubtless, presiding over specialty courts is emotionally exhausting but the resulting improvements are well worth it. These turnarounds carry her to continue with her work. The benefit is indeed mutual.

### **Conclusion**

The 54B drug court gives participants the opportunity to take their lives back by removing barriers to sobriety. There can be no doubt that this is a much needed and welcome resource. My conversation with Judge Larkin and her right hand woman left me with a great deal of hope for everyone who will be accepted into the specialty court. Below is a link to the participant handbook. Share it; you just might help someone regain their life and achieve long term sobriety.

<https://cityofeastlansing.com/1782/Drug-Court>