

## Articles

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By Henri E. Cauvin  
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### **Lukewarm Reception for a Last Chance Officials Cite Drug Program's Promise, but Few Mothers Enroll**

After the city charged her with neglect and took away her children earlier this year, Wanda Ross needed a way out of her troubles.

So she escaped the only way she knew: She went off and got high, just as she had been doing when city social workers came to her home and found her children alone, and just as she had been doing for the better part of eight years.

For months afterward, the 37-year-old Northwest mother would, she says, show up at D.C. Superior Court high, another hit of crack cocaine closer to losing her children for good.

Last month, she appeared before Judge Anita Josey-Herring and was presented with probably her best and perhaps her last shot at retaining custody of her children. What is surprising is not that she was high but that she managed, in a moment of clarity she cannot quite explain, to do what she needed to do.

The court was starting a new residential treatment program for drug-addicted mothers, focused not only on the women but on their children as well, and Ross was being offered a chance to be among the first participants.

"I was tired," she said in interview over lunch at the Southeast Washington facility where she is being treated. "I was tired of not taking care of my children the way I'm supposed to."

As Ross picked at her sandwich, her 18-month-old daughter sat in a high chair next to her, munching on Goldfish crackers and doing her best to keep her mom's attention. Ross's 6-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son are living at the center, too, but were off at day camp. Her 17-year-old daughter, too old to live at the center, is staying with an aunt while her mother goes through treatment.

Without her children here, the program might have been too hard, she said. "I would have been missing my kids. I don't think I could have done it."

Ross is a pioneer in Family Treatment Court, an unprecedented effort by the city's courts to shepherd troubled mothers and their children to a better life. Never before have city judges built a program around residential treatment and rarely have they had the broad discretion necessary to place women and their children in such a facility.

And yet, in a city with an estimated 60,000 drug addicts, the program is greatly underused. It's had a slow start that proponents, particularly the judges at D.C. Superior Court, did not expect.

Under new local and federal laws, family court judges now have roughly 18 months to make decisions about what to do with abused and neglected children. The new laws are an effort to keep children from languishing in the child welfare system for years. Judges can decide that a child must be freed for adoption or remain in foster care. Family Treatment Court is an effort to help women quickly and comprehensively so that when the time for a decision comes, a judge knows whether a woman has responded or not.

Ideally, Family Treatment Court will keep the families together, but the ultimate objective is to find a safe, long-term solution for the children.

So how is it -- two months into the Family Treatment Court's 12-month pilot period, in a city with a supposed shortage of treatment options -- that barely a third of the beds in the new program are full?

Along with Ross, six other women have enrolled in the six-month program, a number well short of the 18 spaces available. "I think it's kind of astonishing that more than that have not come forward," said Priscilla Skillman, who is the assistant director of the Council for Court Excellence and is tracking changes in Family Court.

The slow pace has caused anxiety among some of the proponents, including Josey-Herring, who knows that she needs to show results to sustain funding for the \$1.4 million project -- funding that is coming from the city's Child and Family Services Agency.

A sharp drop in the number of neglect cases filed in Superior Court over the last year and a half is part of the explanation, but some people familiar with the project say the situation is more complicated.

For the treatment court to work, all of the agencies with a hand in child welfare must buy into the project, and while everyone has signed on, Josey-Herring is worried. The program hasn't had time to earn genuine commitment from many of the players. Deputy Mayor Carolyn N. Graham, the program's chief advocate, is stepping down.

"One thing I wonder is whether that collaboration will continue," Josey-Herring said.

Graham says that the mayor, a former foster child himself, is solidly behind the program.

Even so, others say it is optimistic to believe that a program as intense and restrictive as the Family Treatment Court initiative would or could appeal to more than a minority of drug abusers.

Life in the three-story converted crack house is not an easy adjustment for many women. The center is like a rooming house or dormitory. The women share a bedroom with their children and a bathroom with other families. They watch the same television in the common room and eat together in the same basement dining room. After lunch, they smoke together in the fenced-in yard; on the weekends, they

shop together when their counselors take them on excursions. It is a different life from that to which they are accustomed.

"They have to hit bottom, and some of them aren't there," said Lauren Kahn, a veteran family court lawyer. "Dealing with a drug problem has to be one of the most difficult human endeavors, and it's very hard for some of them to commit to doing that."

A client of hers seemed like a good candidate for the program, which is run by the Community Action Group, a contractor. For days, the lawyer tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the woman to enter the program. "I wanted her to go in so bad it hurt," Kahn said. "But none of us can force them."

Most of the women who have enrolled so far are in their 30s, older than many of the city's drug-addicted mothers.

Even though they have chosen to enroll, says clinical director Melody Jackson, many participants still seem a bit uncertain when they arrive. "I don't know if they are apprehensive, but they are curious and wondering if this will work for them," she said.

The program, she said, is about more than drugs. "It's really rebuilding their lives and empowering their future."

One 39-year-old woman who entered the program last month had to discover that she couldn't kick the habit on her own before she accepted an invitation into the program. Her son, who is now 10, had been taken away after she didn't pick him up from school one day and didn't make it back to the homeless shelter where they were living until early the next day.

"I was using drugs," she said.

The court told her that if she took parenting classes and passed a series of drug tests, she could be reunited with her son. "I thought I could handle it," said the woman, who did not want her name disclosed. But she couldn't, and three days later, worried that her son was slipping away, she checked herself into detox and volunteered to enter the program. "I just knew I had to get off the street."

Now, she and the six other women spend long, full days trying to exorcise addiction and embrace motherhood.

They begin around 7 a.m., washing up with their children before breakfast. After they eat, the children go off to school or camp or into the play room where the small children are cared for, and the mothers head off for aerobics or yoga, depending on the day. Classes on parenting and life skills fill most mornings, and individual and group counseling fill much of the afternoons. On the weekends, they have field trips, church, a book club and a movie night.

The parenting class has a lesson plan, but for the women, seated in a semicircle, it is less about learning skills and more about understanding themselves, and how far they have come and still have to go.

"Just because you're in here getting yourself together, nothing out there is changing," Carolyn C. Washington, an addiction counselor at the program, tells them. "The change has to come from you."

A study by the federal Center for Abuse Prevention has found that women who go through residential drug treatment programs while living with their children were far less likely to neglect or abuse their children again than women who go through other types of drug treatment programs.

Many of the women marvel at how different their lives are now and how they interact with their children in ways that were hard to imagine only a few weeks earlier. "He realizes I'm a lot sharper, that I know what's going on," one mother said of her son.

But thinking back on how they treated their children before is often painful for the women. "When I was using, I didn't have time for my kids," another woman, who arrived only a couple of days before, tells her fellow mothers. "I would just say, 'Not now, later. Not now, later.' "

After years of indifference from her mother, the woman's 8-year-old daughter has become difficult. "She's really filled with anger, and I don't know how to deal with it," the woman said before breaking into tears.

"It's okay to cry," Washington says.

Ross knows that loving yourself, as the women are told to do during treatment, is the key to conquering addiction, but when she reflects on herself and how she abandoned her children, she has a hard time working up compassion for someone with a capacity for such neglect.

"They love me, but do I love them?" she asks.

It has been only one month. There are five more to go. And then a lifetime of difficult recovery. Ross, who also will get six months of outpatient care through the program, has been in treatment at least four times before, so she knows it won't be easy.

Functionally illiterate, she says the shame of not being able to read well enough even to fill out a job application fed her addiction. Now, she is learning to read and write. She is, she says, not only kicking her addiction but changing her life.

Having her children around helps her, she said. "They want their mother to get well," she said. "I tell them I'm in school to learn not to use drugs."

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