



When Martina Brown gave birth to her youngest son in November 2009, she knew she wouldn't be leaving the hospital with him.

Ms. Brown, 39, had used drugs throughout her pregnancy and when doctors discovered her newborn had drugs in his system, he was immediately placed in foster care, she said.

On Friday, after Ms. Brown and nine other women graduated from the Superior Court of the District of Columbia's Family Treatment Court, she recalled how far she had come in battling her drug addiction since hitting "rock bottom."

"I'm on my feet now. I know my road to recovery will still be a struggle," said Ms. Brown, who was homeless when she entered the program.

She now lives in transitional housing with her son in Southeast and is enrolled in classes to become a home health aide.

Active since 2003, the substance-abuse treatment program has helped dozens of women get sober and reunite with their children after losing them to social services due to their own drug or alcohol abuse, said Magistrate Judge S. Pamela Gray. Judges recommend women for the program, but the women have to demonstrate commitment to the program in order to graduate.

"A lot of people just say they want to get their children back and they won't accept they have this problem and they need to work on it," Judge Gray said.

The 15-month program places women in a residential treatment facility for six months where they are able to live in a stable environment and receive drug, alcohol and mental health counseling. At some point during their stay, their children are typically moved into the facility as well, allowing counselors to observe how the mothers and children interact. The children's health and development is also tracked and counselors and teachers provide aide for the children based on their needs.

"The case management is really holistic in looking at the entire family's needs," Judge Gray said, noting that when women receive the same types of services piecemeal they tend to be less effective.

After the six months, the women and children move either back into their own homes or into transitional living in the case they were homeless before joining the program.

"They gave me stable living and permanent housing," said one of Friday's graduates, Breana Obenson, 21.

Ms. Obenson said she lost custody of her 2-year-old son in August 2010 after someone slipped her PCP and she went to the hospital to get checked out. When she tested positive for drugs, social services took custody of her son and placed him in foster care.

"I never in a million years thought something like this would happen to me," she said, adding she hopes to regain custody by the start of summer.

At the graduation ceremony, held in a courtroom on the bottom floor of the D.C. Superior Court building, judges and case workers applauded the graduates and offered them words of encouragement.

"What you have done is extremely difficult," said Judge Hiram E. Puig-Lugo, deputy presiding judge in D.C.'s family court. "Don't ever let anything or anybody hold you back because you have what it takes."

Others acknowledged the biggest difficulties may still lay ahead.

"Your work is just beginning. There will be hurdles and storms, so don't give up," said Yvette Smith, a 34-year drug user who graduated from the first Family Treatment Court session in 2003.

Ms. Brown said she has already been tested once. Less than a month after moving into transitional housing her mother died and she relapsed. The incident has only strengthened her resolve.

"I didn't want to use grieving as an excuse to go back to using," she said. "I want to stay sober."

Relapses happen, Judge Gray said, but women who graduate the program are better equipped to handle them.

"I've been on cases for six years and I could count on one hand the people who relapsed and the children came back into care," Judge Gray said. "Not to say women don't relapse but one of the things they learn is there are resources out there so they've been able to pick themselves back up."