



Low-level offenders take high “STEPS” to success under Pima County Superior Court’s new pre-indictment diversion program

A longtime Tucson resident is one of the latest enrollees in STEPs, an innovative new Pima County Superior Court-based pre-indictment diversion program offering a second chance to individuals brought before the court on low-level possession only felony drug charges.

The “Supportive Treatment and Engagement Program” is formally an expansion of Superior Court’s specialty drug court, offered in partnership with the Pima County Attorney’s Office, Pima County Public Defense Services, and the Pima County Administrator’s office, with support from local law enforcement, both the Pima County Sheriff’s and Tucson Police Departments.

Speaking through a court-appointed interpreter before the STEPs program’s Presiding Judge, Danelle Liwski, the 53-year-old offender said, “I’m very happy with this opportunity because of the mistake I made.” He then promised Judge Liwski he would do everything possible to complete the STEPs program successfully.

STEPS is a short-term, early intervention program. It is intended to divert nonviolent individuals struggling with drug addiction and mental health challenges away from the criminal justice system by promptly supplying targeted resources and treatment.

Immediately following admission to STEPs, participants will be screened by Superior Court pretrial diversion specialists. Their assessment results will pair them with focused services provided by approved community-based behavioral health agencies. The agencies will support and manage the individual’s rehabilitation and recovery through substance use therapy, physical and mental health treatment, and, if needed, the provision of housing resources.

Pretrial Services Supervisor Cindy Buchler, a STEPs court diversion specialist working directly with individuals in the program, noted, “It has been a whirlwind, but a wonderfully collaborative effort between the court, various county agencies, and our health and service providers.”

Judge Liwski, who also presides over the Superior Court’s criminal bench agreed, and added, “Many people enter the criminal justice system because of substance abuse issues. STEPs introduces an opportunity for treatment within a week after an individual’s initial criminal justice interaction.”

STEPS, which launched in mid-February, is expected to impact 600 to 1,000 low-level offenders every year. The program will connect individuals with solid guidance, appropriate solutions, and realistic life plans, including counseling, relapse prevention techniques, and behavioral and cognitive restructuring. And perhaps the primary reward – when an individual completes STEPs successfully, they will not be prosecuted by the County Attorney’s office on the initial charges.

“We hope the ability to connect individuals with treatment quickly will help prevent both their ongoing substance abuse and further interactions with the criminal justice system,” said Judge Liwski.

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