

Oct. 4 Open House set for new Drug Court facility in Walnut Grove

October 2, 2012

The Eighth Circuit Drug Court will host an Open House 3:30 to 6 p.m. Oct. 4 at its new office at 155 Main Street in Walnut Grove.

Growth in Drug Court programs caused the operation to outgrow the previous offices in the old Walnut Grove Town Hall. The offices now house the staff of the Eighth Circuit Drug Court, serving adult participants from Leake, Scott, Newton and Neshoba counties, as well as the staff of juvenile Drug Courts for Leake, Newton and Scott counties.

Eighth Circuit Drug Court Coordinator Marcus Ellis said that the juvenile Drug Court programs for Leake, Scott and Newton counties were housed together in Walnut Grove to facilitate their establishment. They are unique among the state's drug courts in that they are a cooperative effort of two separate Chancery Court districts overseen by two chancellors and three Youth Court referees.

Juvenile Drug Court Coordinator Leigh Brown said, "It's cost-effective, and it brings a sense of unity. We are able to work as a cohesive unit."

State Drug Court Coordinator Joey Craft said, "Finding creative ways to share resources and reduce overall costs is something that most taxpayers want to see. That is exactly what was intended when we developed a cooperative drug court model for smaller, more rural youth drug court programs. We expect this model will become more popular as we work to bring drug court programs within reach of every Mississippian in need."

The felony adult Drug Court for the four-county area began operation in 2004, and currently has 165 adult participants. More than 100 people have graduated from the Eighth Circuit Drug Court, Ellis said.

The Leake County Juvenile Drug Court started in 2009. Scott County partnered with Leake in August 2011, and Newton County joined the program this past August. Brown said that the Leake and Scott county juvenile program averages between 20 and 25 participants, and three juveniles from Newton County have been referred to the program.

Chancery Judge Cynthia Brewer, whose district includes Leake County, said, "The need has proven itself. Numbers support the expansion."

The larger Walnut Grove facility has also allowed the Juvenile Drug Court to expand the scope of its services, Brown said. "We have meeting space to conduct group counseling, family therapy and other therapeutic avenues for the children and their parents," she said. Before the move, the program did not have a large enough meeting room, and the budget was not sufficient to allow renting a meeting place for groups.

The newly renovated facility has its own courtroom. "This will enable the Drug Court to actually hold court in a dedicated facility, which will greatly improve efficiency," Ellis said. "The new facility will save a great deal of travel time for staff, since we no longer have to travel to Forest and to Carthage for court each Tuesday."

Circuit Judge Vernon Cotten convenes the adult Drug Court weekly, requiring participants to report and give an accounting of their successes or shortcomings in the

program. The location change is not expected to significantly impact travel for participants. Adult drug Court participants from all four counties already travel to Walnut Grove for weekly drug testing.

Having a separate courtroom for Eighth Circuit Drug Court also will eliminate any scheduling conflicts with other court proceedings at the courthouses in Carthage and Forest.

The 6,000-square-foot facility has seven offices, a drug testing room, a break room, storage space, an enclosed garage for the program's mobile anti-drunk driving demonstration, and a metal carport.

The building at 155 Main Street was an automobile dealership until the early 1950s, an auto parts business until the late 1990s, then a car wash and detail shop. Building owner Al Easom renovated the space to the Drug Court's specifications, Ellis said.

"We have a building completely designed with efficient Drug Court operations in mind," Ellis said.

The lease runs through the end of 2015, when the current Board of Supervisors' term of office expires.

Rent is \$2,400 per month, not including utilities. The previous rent for the smaller office space was \$2,500 per month, including utilities, Ellis said. Utilities have averaged \$300 a month since the court moved in July. The rental agreement calls for the price to be renegotiated after Easom has recovered his investment in the building. Ellis said he expects the rent to decrease.

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