

Acting ‘Drug Czar’ Walks the Talk



Botticelli: At D.C. drug-court graduation. (Anita Jarman, D.C. Courts)



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May 28, 2014

In front of a boisterous courtroom packed with recovering drug addicts and their family members sat an array of security guards and one neatly dressed White House official. **Michael Botticelli**, acting director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, makes a habit of stopping by graduation ceremonies for the drug-court system—for both personal and professional reasons.

The event last week in downtown Washington saw five people graduate from the city’s drug court, an alternative to the criminal-justice system that provides treatment for addicts and, in some cases—depending on state and local laws—allows them to return to society without a record provided they haven’t relapsed.

Three of four drug-court graduates remain arrest-free for at least two years after leaving the program, according to the National Association of Drug Court Professionals. The drug-court system started about two

decades ago, and already more than 2,700 drug courts are operating in the United States, according to the National Drug Court Institute.

Botticelli was not completely out of place in the crowd; 26 years ago, at the age of 30, he was brought to court for drunken driving. He remembers the judge giving him two choices: Enter the criminal-justice system or get help for his alcohol addiction. He chose the latter.

Botticelli's experience led him to a lifetime of work helping people with substance-abuse problems. After completing a treatment program in 1988, he spent three years in private-treatment and substance-abuse work, another 11 years in the substance-abuse division at the Massachusetts Public Health Department, and nine more years as director of the state's Bureau of Substance Abuse Services. He became deputy director of the White House drug-policy office in late 2012, then rose to acting "drug czar" in March when Gil Kerlikowske became commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Botticelli says he's an example of the potential that lies in giving second chances to people who come into contact with the criminal-justice system through their struggle with addiction.

His story is also a prime example of where America's drug policy is headed: toward providing the public health resources needed to prevent and treat addiction before it becomes a criminal-justice problem.

"Addiction is a disease," Botticelli said. "The criminal-justice system plays a key role, but fundamentally we have to deal with this as a public health issue. We have to make sure that we're implementing good prevention programs, intervention programs, and treatment programs and have criminal-justice policy that diverts people away from the criminal-justice system."

Botticelli comes from an upstate New York family with a history of addiction, but he didn't know that put him at risk. It wasn't until he hit bottom following a drunk-driving accident that he got help—and that's not soon enough, Botticelli said.

"We don't say to people with high blood pressure, we're going to wait until you have a heart attack," he said. "You're periodically checking their blood pressure and intervening."

Botticelli expects the Affordable Care Act to have a big impact on doctors' ability to catch addiction in regular screenings and checkups, because the health law requires insurance companies to cover preventive services at no additional cost to the consumer.

"If people are able to get more timely treatment and intervention," he asked, "will they not end up in the criminal-justice system?"

That's a hypothesis yet to be tested, but Botticelli is confident, given what he's seen in previous studies on the impact of access to treatment on crime and arrest statistics.

"What you see is that the cost savings generated by treatment comes from two main areas: decreased crime and criminal-justice involvement, and decreased health care costs," he said.

Beyond treatment, the White House drug-control office is working to ensure that drug-court graduates have the tools they need to reintegrate into society. Housing, education, and employment can be big hurdles for recovering addicts, and effective public policy requires coordinating the efforts of the Justice, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development departments.

But even the community of drug-court participants can be a lasting support system in itself.

At the ceremony, a man still in the recovery program stood up and admitted he was supposed to be among the graduates, but he had relapsed. “I wish that I was graduating,” he said, greeted with notes of support from the crowd.

One graduate’s wife also stood up. “I’d just like to say thanks to this program, because I got my husband back,” she said.

Dancer and 2007 graduate Cathy Hurt was among the distinguished guests invited to offer an address. “I wasn’t a bad person, I just did bad things,” Hurt said, looking over at the graduates. “It’s time for you to show people that we do recover, and we do lead lives that make a difference.”

Hurt opened her first dance school—My Turning Pointe School of Dance—in early May.

This article appears in the May 29, 2014 edition of NJ Daily as Life After Drugs.