



Hopes rise for creation of Illawarra drug court

By EMMA SPILLETT

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Calls for a drug court in the region have been backed by the formation of a new taskforce dedicated to getting the specialist court up and running by 2015.

A team of Illawarra solicitors, drug and alcohol counsellors, psychologists and researchers have banded together to explore the feasibility of a Wollongong drug court and to start chasing much-needed funding.

Four members of the taskforce, including Nowra drug rehabilitation centre Oolong House CEO Ivern Ardler, forensic psychologist Elizabeth Kramer, University of Wollongong senior lecturer Dr Mitchell Byrne and solicitor Renata Matyear, spent several hours at Parramatta's Drug Court last week, observing the proceedings.

MORE: Lawyers push for drug court in Wollongong

(<http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1414951/lawyers-push-for-drug-court-in-wollongong/?cs=300>)

Ms Matyear said the court's collaborative approach, using the advice of counsellors, health representatives and nurses along with the traditional defence solicitor and prosecutor, was eye-opening.

"It's quite a different process to the traditional criminal justice system," she said.

"[All the parties] meet prior to court where they review every client's progress, so when court starts it is extremely well co-ordinated and it allows the court to make very good decisions very quickly."

Ms Matyear is confident the court could succeed but says government funding is critical.

She conceded the court was not a short-term project.

"It seems fitting that a drug court be included in plans for the courthouse

renovation," she said.

"It's also a sensible timeframe; we really need to get the interest of the government so they will commit funding as we would want the court to facilitate a catchment area from Wollongong to the Shoalhaven.

"It does take money to staff it and get it moving but the cost-saving of keeping people out of jail will be massive to the community."

Ms Matyear believes the drug court is critical in breaking cycles of crime for long-term drug offenders and reducing recidivism.

"Drug use is really a problem across all communities; I see it daily as a solicitor, it's a constant presence in the background of so many clients," she said.

"There are so many people who just slide into that sort of criminal activity; they start using drugs and then they have interrupted education, they fall out of the schooling system and then can't get work so it begins this cycle of addiction - they start committing crime to feed the addiction.

"The drug court really does interrupt that criminal cycle - it disrupts that pattern and stops people from going round and round, in and out of jail, and brings them back to being contributing members of society," Ms Matyear said.

The taskforce is now set to visit the drug court in Toronto, in the state's Hunter region.



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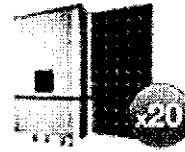
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