

## Livingston County drug court discussed at Issues & Eggs

### ISSUES

**By Paul Westermeyer**

Staff Reporter

The recent implementation of a drug court into the Livingston County criminal justice system was the topic of discussion at Wednesday morning's "Issues & Eggs," hosted by the Pontiac Area Chamber of Commerce. The featured speakers were State's Attorney Randy Yedinak and Resident Circuit Judge Jennifer Bauknecht, who told those gathered that drug courts reduced recidivism and, additionally, was less burdensome financially.

Yedinak said that the drug court has been in operation in the county since April after going through a certification process that lasted nearly a year, adding that there are currently five individuals enrolled in it.

The state's attorney said that as a specialty court, drug court focused on a "target population or a specialty group," in this case, persons dealing with drug addiction.

"If we can get at the root of the problem, then we can stamp out a larger problem, which creates a kind of snowball effect," he said. "With drug addicts, the problem is obviously addiction. If we can get at the root of the problem, then we can stop them from committing crimes.

"What you see across this country are the same individuals, week-in, week-out, who have a heroin addiction that are then committing retail thefts or car burglaries or they're stealing whatever they can get their hands on because then they're going to pawn it or sell it and use that money to buy whatever drug they're addicted to."

The state's attorney explained that drug court was akin to an intensive drug probation program, in which individuals potentially facing prison time could apply for the program. He noted, though, that if certain offenses were committed, such as aggravated battery and drug crimes that indicate delivery or trafficking, he had the power to veto an individual's acceptance into the drug court.

"We've got a treatment schedule, random testing, all kinds of weekly meetings, daily if needed," he said. "They come in and update the judge on how their week went and it is designed to be difficult and to keep people on their toes."

Yedinak noted that the program as it existed in other counties had high rates of individuals failing out of the program, but stressed that that should not be discouraging.

"If we get 100 people and we turn one life around, that's worth it," he said. "In terms of cost and good for society, it's going to be worth it."



**Judge Jennifer Bauknecht looks on as Livingston County State's Attorney Randy Yedinak details what constitutes a drug court at Wednesday morning's Chamber-hosted "Issues & Eggs."** PAUL WESTERMEYER/DAILY LEADER

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The state's attorney mentioned that it cost about \$30,000 annually to house a person at the Pontiac Correctional Center, while putting a person through the drug court was no more of an expense to taxpayers than what it already cost in terms of departmental budgets.

Bauknecht said that the drug court in Livingston County was the first certified in the 11th Judicial Circuit, calling the program

a "collaborative effort," meaning a greater involvement than the courts and the state's attorneys office. She then segued into how a drug court operated.

"We have other partners, such as law enforcement that's very active with us, we have (the Institute for Human Resources) and we have probation," she said. "That team gets together regularly and the team gets to decide what's the best course of action day-to-day, week-to-week for an individual in terms of treatment, employment, drug testing and other issues."

The judge added that others involved included local businesses and landlords, so that the drug court team could arrange for individuals in the program to find work and low-cost housing. She also noted that the implementation of drug courts would open the door for certain grants pertaining to them.

"It's not just a court issue, but it's a community issue, and through the collaboration of the entire community, I think our program is working," she said.