

## Probation Office gives life-changing hope to addicted parolees

Written by The Office of the Commissioners  
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There is now more than a glimmer of hope for drug and alcohol addicts being released from jail -- who wish to stay clean and sober -- thanks to the Intensive Supervision and Treatment program available to Armstrong County residents.

The program is one of the ideas initiated by Judge Kenneth Valasek to try to combat a serious issue for the community.

The Intensive Supervision and Treatment (IST) Program, first launched in 2009, has enrolled approximately 22 participants in the post-prison rehabilitation program.

Ten have graduated from the program and are moving on with their lives as productive members of society, according to Probation Officer Lee Grafton, who is responsible for the day-to-day operation of IST. Officer Grafton noted that this is the first step and that graduates have to continue to work on maintaining sobriety. There is no such thing as a cure.

He said some have already reunited with their families after nearly severing those relationships due to destructive behavior while in the grip of addiction. Most have found gainful employment, or are attending school.

Seven did not complete the program successfully, while the remaining five participants are currently active in treatment sessions. The program lasts an average of 18 to 24 months. The curriculum is divided into six "step-down" stages of treatment. Contact with the probation officer generally decreases as individuals are able to demonstrate a commitment to living a drug and alcohol free lifestyle.

The program is court ordered. Participants, who generally have had multiple drug and alcohol-related brushes with the law, agree to enter the program as an alternative to incarceration. Most are looking at a prison sentence ranging from one year to more than five years in jail.

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Many participants have already been through a rehabilitation center two or three times. Grafton said that past failure does not disqualify offenders from participation. However, he pointed out the Probation Office does not recommend the IST program for hardened career criminals, violent offenders or convicted drug dealers. Maintaining the safety of the community is a top priority. Thus, the intensive supervision aspect is designed to monitor behavior closely.

Dave Hartman, Chief Probation Officer, said the first step, and perhaps the most important, is the initial interview to determine if a person is really interested in recovery.

"They must be interested in changing their lifestyles," said Hartman. "The interview is quite intense and if we detect that they still want to take drugs, or use alcohol...well, we will see them again when they're ready."

Most clients undergo residential treatment, halfway house and community reintegration under the intensive supervision of the Probation Officer. A case manager is assigned to assist the client with educational, housing, employment, mental health or other needs that can impact upon their sobriety.

Contacts begin when they are in "Rehab" and continue throughout the duration of the program. During all phases, clients can receive rewards including small gift certificates donated by local businesses and churches. Clients must submit to random drug and alcohol screenings throughout the program.

The intensity of the treatment diminishes during the subsequent five stages until clients reach the Aftercare Stage, at which time the goal is to have them fully integrated into the community as shown by employment or in an educational program.

The length of time in each phase of the program can vary depending upon the client's progress. Clients are required to be actively involved in support programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. This is critical to the client continuing to maintain an alcohol and drug free lifestyle. The individuals who have graduated are currently working to organize an IST alumni support group.

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