

Antelope Valley Press

Two mothers nearly lost their kids to addiction

Drug Court helped them regain control of their lives and families



By ALISHA SEMCHUCK Valley Press Staff Writer

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PALMDALE Their children or their drug addiction: That was the choice two Antelope Valley mothers faced after a court order removed the youngsters from their family home.

The women now have their children back after they participated in a Drug Court program facilitated by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, which works jointly with other community groups to get parents off drugs and to provide a safe, healthy home atmosphere for children.

In celebration of Family Reunification Week, sponsored by the county, DCFS regional administrators Rick Bryant and Paul Gaeta on Friday invited the mothers Tina Lund and Sheri K to share their stories at a news conference.

"I have three kids. My kids were taken Sept. 15 for marijuana," Lund, 26, said. "I was smoking weed a lot. When they took my kids, it was a wake-up call."

"As soon as they took them, I started thinking, 'What can I do to get them back?' That was my main concern. My main objective was to get them back as soon as possible."

"When my daughter was detained in December '08, I thought there was no hope," said Sheri, whose last name was withheld. "I did my research when the (social) worker said I needed to go through a program."

Sheri said at first she opted for the quickest program she could find, but that didn't help. "I needed to change my people, places and things," she said.

Sheri explained that if she continued to socialize with the same acquaintances and in the same surroundings, she would remain on drugs. And it struck her that the "best solution was to go into the Drug Court program."

When Lund entered the Tarzana Treatment Center, which partners with DCFS in the Drug Court program, she denied smoking marijuana. But, after a month, she began feeling guilty and admitted her drug use.

Her eyes sparkle when she looks at her three daughters the eldest girl is 5 years old and her fraternal twins are 1½.

Lund's case closed successfully in November, according to Nancy Ramirez, her social worker at the DCFS office in Lancaster.

"When Tina started (the program), not only was there drug abuse in the home, she was confused, she was co-dependent," said Ramirez, the first social worker in the Drug Court program when it began in 2007. "I saw Tina evolve in many dimensions."

"Right now, I'm going to school to be a social worker," Lund said. "Nancy changed my perspective from being a cook to (becoming) a social worker. I want to do what she does."

Although Sheri is still in treatment three days a week, she enjoys every moment of interaction with her 3½-year-old daughter.

Sheri said she had certain expectations when she began the program.

"I wanted them to know who I was as a person, and not just another case. The workers get to know us and how we're doing with our children," she said.

At the Drug Court sessions, Sheri said, "we get to be personal with the judge. She's a great judge."

"I did six months residential, then went into day treatment for six months."

After that, Sheri said she moved up to Sober Living, a halfway house owned and operated by Tarzana and used as a transition period.

Sheri said she views all the program team members as family.

"It makes you feel really good. You have family with everybody. To be connected that much in our society today is great because who has that much family?"

Sheri said she has taken some college courses, so when she finishes the program she plans to return and finish her education, pursuing a degree in child development.

Paola Romo, a social worker at the DCFS Palmdale office, had been assigned to Sheri's case.

"I screened her in April '09. She met the criteria. Between May and September, she did an awesome job.

"In September '09 she completed the residential part of the program. She started the outpatient (phase) in September." Romo said Sheri is about ready to graduate from the program.

Lund said being admitted to the drug rehabilitation program was "a blessing in disguise. Everybody was working together," she said of the team of social workers, drug counselors, court officials and others involved in the treatment process. "I've never seen so much cooperation for one person."

"The hard work comes down to the family itself," said Bryant, regional administrator at the Palmdale office.

"The reason we bring you here today is, throughout the county, various (DCFS) offices are celebrating Family Reunification Week," Bryant told the crowd, which included staff members from his agency, representatives from Tarzana Treatment Center, the court system and other social service agencies.

Each of the other DCFS offices in the county highlighted a different family assistance program such as Parents in Partnership, Family Preservation and Linkages, he noted.

Bryant said Palmdale and Lancaster office administrators wanted to highlight the method that makes the Drug Court program successful. He credited Gaeta with conducting the pilot test on that program.

"We have a unique opportunity with the Drug Court," Gaeta said. "We're the only area that has its own dependency court here in Lancaster."

Because of the hardship for families to make the trip to Monterey Park, where the other dependency court is located, the regional administrators in the Antelope Valley appealed to county 5th District Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich to situate a dependency court in Lancaster. Gaeta said that provided the perfect opportunity to implement a Drug Court program.

"This program illustrates how the department has progressed throughout the years," Gaeta said.

Trish Ploehn, director of the Department of Children and Family Services, couldn't attend Friday's event, but Bryant read a statement from her.

"We firmly believe that every child has the right to grow up in a safe, healthy, loving and permanent home ... therefore, our highest priority is to ensure that families are supported with adequate resources to care for their own children," Ploehn wrote. "Foster care is a valuable alternative for children requiring a temporary safe haven; it is not a long-term solution. We know that the longer children stay in foster care, the more likely they are to do poorly in school, experience homelessness and mental health issues."

Gaeta read a statement from Referee Marilyn Mordetzky, who hears all the Antelope Valley cases for the Drug Court program, which began roughly two years ago in Lancaster.

"The Drug Court provides a process by which the parents are able to demonstrate their progress in their drug treatment program to the court on a frequent and consistent basis," the judge wrote. "This frequent and consistent contact with the parents ... allows the court to monitor their progress so that the children may be safely reunited with their parents who have demonstrated they can maintain a drug-free lifestyle."

Social workers for the department screen three to four families a week, said Rochelle Montgomery, a supervisor in the Palmdale office.

"We want to make sure the family wants to participate. It's a very intense process," she noted, in reference to the rehabilitation treatment.

Navid Dae of the Tarzana Treatment Center said from the treatment point of view, they assess the statistics to determine success.

Last year, the staff at Tarzana saw a 60% rate of success among all their clients. But separating out those who participated in the Drug Court program, that success rate reached 90%.

Many factors enter into the equation for success. But one key point, Dae emphasized, is the fact that the Drug Court program participants can freely discuss anything with the Tarzana counselors, including their setbacks.

"We are relaxed and nonjudgmental, so they feel free to come to us and be honest," Dae said.

"The most important thing," Ramirez said, "I have not had one client return to the system."

asemchuck@avpress.com

Caption: love over drugs Tina Lund, left, shares her story with members of the Department of Children and Family services as part of Family Reunification Week on Friday afternoon. Lund has successfully completed the Drug Court program. TROY HARVEY Valley Press