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Given a Choice, Many Ask for Drug Treatment over Jail

Diversion program marks first year of helping people who are under the influence of drugs in public

More than 130 individuals chose drug treatment over jail during the first year of a diversion program created by San Diego City Attorney Mara W. Elliott and Police Chief David Nisleit to provide options for people who are suspected of being under the influence of controlled substances in public.

The multi-agency program, called Prosecution and Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Services, or PLEADS, partners our prosecutors and the San Diego Police Department with County of San Diego social support agencies to help people struggling with addiction. Many of its participants were in a cycle of arrest and jail that often leads to homelessness.

Through this pre-booking diversion approach, individuals can avoid arrest, prosecution, and jail time by choosing to go to a sobering center that offers support services.

From May 2019 to May 2020, 468 low-level drug offenders were referred to a sobering center for evaluation instead of being arrested and booked into jail. Of those 468 individuals, 401 (86%) were referred to substance abuse treatment and 136 (34% of this group) accepted treatment. PLEADS diversion continues despite the COVID-19 public health crisis.

“Seeking treatment for drug dependency instead of going to jail may sound like an easy decision, but to those who struggle with addiction, it’s a difficult and courageous first step,” City Attorney Mara W. Elliott said. **“Although the program is relatively new, early results are encouraging, and we expect participation to grow over time.”**

The PLEADS process begins when law enforcement officers contact qualifying individuals on suspicion of being under the influence of a controlled substance. Suspects can choose to seek treatment rather than be booked into jail and potentially prosecuted for the offense.

Anyone choosing treatment is sent to the Sobering Services Center run by McAlister Institute, where trained staff assess them and link them to local programs ranging from inpatient and outpatient services, to detox, and other appropriate services.

PLEADS is part of the City Attorney’s Office’s larger effort to divert low-level offenders away from the criminal justice system and provide opportunities for individuals to get a fresh start. This saves costs by reducing time spent by the court, law enforcement, attorneys, and first responders, and preserves health care resources by cutting down on expensive, unnecessary emergency room visits.

Recent City Attorney media releases can be accessed on the San Diego City Attorney’s home page located on the Internet at <https://www.sandiego.gov/cityattorney>

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In 2014, the City Attorney's Office launched the Community Justice Initiative (CJI), in which criminal convictions are dismissed if an offender performs community service. Participants also have access to educational, job training, and treatment programs. The City Attorney's Office also administers the San Diego Misdemeanants At-Risk Track (S.M.A.R.T.) Program, which aims to prevent low-level misdemeanor drug offenders from cycling through the criminal justice system without access to services. While PLEADS is an alternative to arrest, S.M.A.R.T. is an alternative to jail time. S.M.A.R.T. safely connects chronic misdemeanor drug offenders, particularly those who are otherwise resistant to intervention, to a case manager and offers personalized treatment and tailored housing placements.

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