

## Governor speaks at Cobb drug treatment program graduation

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MARIETTA — Gov. Nathan Deal said Thursday that it's time to change the long cycle of incarceration that has plagued the state.

Speaking at a graduation ceremony of Cobb County's Family Dependency Treatment Court program, an alternative court for parents with addictions who are in trouble with the law, the former Hall County prosecutor and a juvenile court judge said he wants to increase such accountability courts throughout Georgia.



In April, Gov. Deal signed legislation that created a 13-member commission that will study the state's criminal justice system and present its findings to the General Assembly next January. Present at that signing in Gainesville was Deal's son, Superior Court Judge Jason Deal, who presides over Hall County's drug court.



"We're going to be looking across the board at what we can do to begin to change the cycle of what is happening in our state and has been happening for a very long time," Gov. Deal said.



"In Georgia, we have the fourth largest prison population of any state in the country. We are only the 10th largest in terms of population. Even more staggering is that one out of every 13 Georgians is under some form of correctional supervision."

Ten men and women graduated from the FDTC in a ceremony at Marietta First Baptist Church on Church Street. Since 2005, when Cobb Juvenile Court Judge Juanita Stedman formed the drug court, more than

60 people have graduated from the program. Currently, 42 mothers, 15 fathers and 89 children are involved in the program.

Participants voluntarily enroll in the residential treatment program, which initially began as part of Cobb Juvenile Court.

The FDTC deals with child deprivation cases when one or both parents of small children have substance abuse problems. It helps them deal with addiction and regain custody of their children. There has not been any new deprivation cases opened with participants since its founding, according to the program. A number of specialists and volunteers work with the program.

"I don't do the heavy lifting when it comes to drug court," Stedman said. "The heavy lifting is done by the team."

In Georgia, a drug-court sentence costs more than \$10,000 less than a prison sentence, according to The Economist magazine.

The FDTC operates on an annual budget of \$125,000, according to the state Department of Human Services. It's funded by government grants and private donations.

Melanie Rhodes, a mother of three who is now studying auto repair at Chattahoochee Technical College, spoke passionately about how the court saved her life. She said she was one of the few participants who sought to be placed in the program.

"I was so lost and broken — just shambles of a person," recalled Rhodes, a former drug addict. "I had no hope when I got here."

Martin and Cristal Preston were methamphetamine addicts who said they were enrolled kicking and screaming into the program. But like the other graduates, both eventually came around to realizing how much they needed help. Cristal Preston said one is never too old to get help.

A drug addict for 30 years, Martin Preston became emotional on stage with his wife and three children while speaking of his addiction. He said he thought he was going to die an addict.

"This program saved my life," he said.

Upon receiving certificates on stage, all of the graduates credited Stedman and the staff of the program for not allowing them to give up when they wanted to quit. In particular, some women described how difficult it was to have their children taken away from them.

"I'm so grateful to have this opportunity to change my life and take care of my kids on my own — something that I've never done," said Susan Edwards.

Marietta lawyer Justin O'Dell, a longtime FDTC supporter, said the community is what makes the program so successful.

"This community has bought in and supported this program," said O'Dell, board chair of Reconnecting Families, which supports the FDTC. "You can see that by everyone in the room."

In addition to the family and friends of graduates, there were a number of officials who attended the program's sixth graduation ceremony. Among them were: First Lady Sandra Deal; Cobb Chairman Tim Lee; Commissioner Woody Thompson; Sheriff Neal Warren; Shan Cooper of Lockheed Martin; state Child Advocate Director Tonya Boga; state Reps. Judy Manning and Lindsey Tippins; Superior Court Judges Adele Grubbs and George Kreeger; Juvenile Judges James Whitfield, Joanne Elsey and Gregory Poole; State Court Clerk Diane Webb; and former state Sen. Chuck Clay and his wife, Sara.

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