Bush agrees to send DWI cases to court

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Mothers Against Drunk Driving on Thursday extracted a promise from District Attorney Bryan Bush to send DWI offenders to court instead of referring them to a private counseling agency operated by some of his political supporters.

Ronald Bullion, administrative assistant to the district attorney, said the 45 cases already referred to Court Referral Services would be handled through the new DWI program established by Bush. Bullion again declined to release the names of offenders who have been diverted from the judicial system.

But, Bullion said, Bush and his staff will ask the District Court judges next week to consider referring those who plead guilty or are convicted of DWI to Court Referral Services as a condition of probation.

A spokesman for Mothers Against Drunk Driving said the group sought a meeting with Bush after the Morning Advocate reported establishment of the program by Bush.

Under Bush's plan, Court Referral Services would get a $360 fee from first offenders, with $75 of that amount being returned to the district attorney's office. The offenders also would have to pay for any other social service agencies to which CRS refers them.

Court Referral Services is operated by Don Hidalgo, Dr. Marc Zimmermann and Leslie Sheets, a certified substance abuse counselor. Zimmermann was a contributor to Bush's campaign for the district attorney's job last year.

Local MADD President Randie Krogel, MADD state administrator Don Larson and MADD attorney Felix Weill met with Bush, Bullion, owners of CRS and Pat Bonanno, under whom the programs operate.

Earlier, MADD spokesmen said public agencies to which DWI offenders are referred charge less than the private firm to which Bush began referring DWI first offenders in August. Bush had entered a one-year contract with CRS last April to operate the program, which would allow offenders to avoid the criminal record, higher insurance rates, possible jail sentences and public service assignments that generally are conditions for those who go through the judicial system and are convicted or plead guilty to driving while intoxicated.

Bryan Bush

Bush's program "shortchanged the whole system," Chief Criminal Judge Mike Ponder said. Neither the Judicial Expense Fund nor Public Defender's Office could collect fines from those Bush's office diverted, and the sheriff's office and general fund of the parish government were deprived of their share of fines and forfeitures from DWI offenders referred to CRS.

"We are completely satisfied with the district attorney's response," Krogel said. "All we want him to do is to follow the law and let first-offense DWIs go through the courts."

She said MADD feels asking judges to refer clients to CRS would be more satisfactory than having the district attorney take offenders out of the judicial system.

Under state law, judges can sentence DWI offenders to pay fines, serve jail sentences, and as conditions of probation order that they perform community service and seek counseling for alcohol abuse.