Drug program forces participation of offenders

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15th Judicial District to get funding by grants

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LAFAYETTE — U.S. Attorney Michael Skinner said his office has secured three grants, including one for the 15th Judicial District, to create drug programs in which drug offenders will be forced to participate.

"This actually is a planning grant to set up an all-encapsulating drug intervention program," Skinner said. It will be up to the agencies that receive the grant, such as the 15th Judicial District, to develop the programs, which could include mandatory drug testing and treatment counseling. Skinner said.

In addition to the 15th Judicial District of Lafayette, Vermilion and Acadia parish, the District Attorney's Office in Allen Parish and the Ouachita Parish Police Jury also received grants to start drug courts, Skinner said.

The 15th District will receive $33,000; Allen Parish $22,365, and Ouachita Parish $28,230, Skinner said. The money comes from Congress's Violent Crime Act of 1994, closing drug courts and follow-up programs to try to get offenders of drug use is welcomed.

"We know that a lot of repeat offenders are drug addicts," said Skinner. "Without treatment programs, they will be back on the street and the system. We know that spending our money on keeping them in jail does not stop the problem because when they get out it's the same result." Skinner said.

"These grants can develop this, we can stop the cycle," said Skinner.

He pointed out that the three grants went to different agencies involved in the judicial system in their areas — the courts in the 15th Judicial District; the District Attorney's Office in Allen Parish and the Police Jury in Ouachita Parish.

What that means is it will take everybody working together to establish the programs," Skinner said.

The Federal Office of Justice Programs administers the grant program and will sponsor workshops at the sites selected for the grants.

Skinner said 53 grants were awarded.

The result is repeat offenses and more jail time, which ultimately hurts taxpayers in their pocketbooks, said Hanson. The costs of keeping drug offenders jailed could be decreased if the users were persuaded to stop.

"I'm not talking about the dealers, who belong in jail," said Hanson. "I'm talking about the street-level users who are arrested for simple possession. These are the ones who give the dealers the market, and if we can get them to stop, we can dry up that market." Skinner heard.

Skinner said he envisions a community commission to develop the plan for the court intervention program. The commission would include people from all aspects of the judicial system, he said.

"This is not going to happen very fast," Skinner said. "We don't have a lot of time, and we have to do it properly." The three grants should be dispersed by the end of the year, Skinner said.

Arrests for those who completed the court's mandatory post-conviction programs, Skinner said.