



**Judge Liza Rodriguez
Bexar County DWI Court
County Court-at-Law No. 8
San Antonio, Texas**

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DWI Court graduates celebrate sobriety, new outlook on life

County Court-at-Law Judge Liza Rodriguez on Friday presented 10 new graduates from the Bexar County DWI Court. The specialty court was established in 2013 to help repeat offenders (or offenders with at least one prior DWI conviction) who are currently on probation for a misdemeanor DWI offense and who have been clinically diagnosed with alcohol dependence.

Instead of incarceration, the participants serve straight probation with an intensive therapy regimen including attendance at two 12-step meetings per week, therapy three times a week, regular court appearances, meetings with court staff and weekly field visits. The DWI Court is one of several specialty treatment courts in Bexar County, which include the Drug Courts, Mental Health Court, Veterans Treatment Court and Re-entry Courts. The goal of all the specialty courts is to put nonviolent offenders in treatment for the root causes of their criminal behavior.

“I wanted to establish the DWI Court because I kept seeing defendants come through this revolving door of DWI arrests and convictions without any attempt to treat their alcoholism,” Judge Rodriguez said. “If we can get defendants on their second DWI arrest — at the misdemeanor level — and help them turn their lives around, they are less likely to reoffend and then face a felony charge. But more important, they become self-sustaining members of our community.”

Judge Rodriguez works with a probation officer, case manager, treatment officer, prosecutor and defense attorney to screen each potential participant. Defendants referred to her court have three options: enter the program and stay out of jail, accept the strict terms of probation,

or go to jail. Sometimes defendants would rather take the jail time because the program is hard work.

Melissa, who graduated Friday after nearly 15 months in the program, faced significant obstacles beyond the strict regimen of the program — things that might cause one to fall back to drinking and self-medication. She endured a period of homelessness, lost a family member and faced many other hurdles including transportation. However, Melissa, who said she drank most of her life remained focused and committed to her sobriety, and became a positive role model to her peers in recovery. She has been sober almost two years.

According to the National Center for DWI Courts, repeat DWI offenders who graduate from a program are up to 65 percent less likely to be re-arrested for a new offense. DWI Courts also save a substantial amount of taxpayer money that would otherwise pay for incarceration, court costs and prolonged or repeated probation supervision.

Of 7,649 DWI arrests in Bexar County during 2013:

- 5,637 were DWI 1st offenses;
- 1,105 were 2nd offenses;
- 703 were 3rd or more;
- 152 were with a child passenger younger than 15 years old;
- 37 were intoxication assaults;
- And 15 were intoxication manslaughters.

“Each and every graduate of this program is one less person we have potentially driving while intoxicated on our streets,” Judge Rodriguez said. “This court is about changing and improving lives while making our community safer.”

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