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To the Editor:

As Haywood County prepares to launch its first-ever recovery/sobriety/treatment court, it is my hope that it will be received in the spirit of hope and that it will follow the lifesaving model and the standards that have been set by the specialty courts in the 40<sup>th</sup> and the 35<sup>th</sup> Prosecutorial Districts.

I watched a recent meeting of the Haywood County Board of Commissioners with growing concern that they were so uninformed about recovery courts, which is both tragic and inexcusable. They have the duty of helping our county out of the chaos of crime, escalating overdose deaths, and homelessness, resulting from substance use, and will be authorizing the use of hundreds of thousands of tax dollars, grant funds, and opioid settlement monies.

In 2014, I was asked, along with Chief Bill Hollingsed, to review the Buncombe County DWI Treatment Court, on behalf of the NC Governor's Highway Safety Program, to see if it was something we could support.

I think that we both went into it, curious and doubtful, but, after meeting the staff, and attending the first few sessions, I became a supporter, a dedicated ambassador, and I realized that, for some individuals, this is the way out of a destructive lifestyle, if they are willing to do 16-24 months of very hard work, and do, what in the beginning, looks so very impossible.

I began to also review the Veteran's Court, where I saw the number of lives lifted up and permanently changed, and where I saw that our highest duty to our service members begins when they come home.

Every time I go to a graduation ceremony, I stand in awe when the graduates announce the changes in their lives-new jobs, paid bills, healed families, good health- and their joy in being

sober, for some, the first time in many years. I understand what it took to succeed, and what a fearsome endeavor it has been.

Many of the people discussing the new Haywood County hybrid court have never been in a recovery court, as a participant, an observer, or an official, and have never had a conversation with a graduate. They do not have information about the strict screening process, the swift and severe sanctions, the curfews, the technology, or the challenging requirements. They have not seen the creativity of a court staff that uses technology, intensive supervision, Warrior K-9s, experienced mentors, and all kinds of other interventions, to help those who are struggling succeed. More importantly, they do not understand the blending of extraordinary compassion and absolute accountability that is the backbone of these courts.

In 2014, Sheriff Curtis Cochran and I first presented the concept of specialty courts to the Swain County Commissioners. In 2015, the presiding judge over the Buncombe County DWI Treatment Court came, with her entire staff, to the Waynesville Police Department, to educate the community about that court.

Eight years later, on February 11, 2022, she returned again to the Waynesville Police Department, and did an educational event. Thank you to the Town of Waynesville for being represented at that event, by your mayor and two aldermen.

I also invited <sup>an</sup> delegation from Haywood County to attend an educational event with the Buncombe County staff on May 10, 2021.

Thank you to the Haywood County Clerk of Superior Court, <sup>and to</sup> Mr. Jim Blythe, and the Pathways staff who attended.

I have spoken <sup>and</sup> to the Haywood County Commissioners on many occasions over the years about these courts; they were a very important topic of the judicial debates in 2020, both in Haywood County, on February 9, 2020, and in Cherokee County, on September 26, 2020. A graduate of the Buncombe County Veteran's Court accompanied me to speak to the Canton Town Board, not long ago, where we were very warmly received, and they were quick to offer encouragement and support.

On August 10, 2021, after a series of events which endangered dozens of WNC residents, I sent a furious and formal demand for these four specialty courts to be immediately established in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Prosecutorial District: Adult Drug Court, Youth Drug Court, DWI Treatment Court, and Veteran's Court.

For the fledgling Haywood County court to be successful, it will require the community to understand it, to observe it, and to support it. The court will have needs, in the future, that can only be met by citizens who can intelligently discuss future funding and the relevant data that will guide not only funding, but will keep the court moving in the right direction, and to never let the court become the object of political intrigue.

These specialty courts are the extreme opposite of enabling. Nothing is free, everything is earned. Violations result in sanctions which are swift and severe. Entering this process is not for the lazy, or the faint of heart.

I, and others, believe so strongly in these specialty courts that in 2019 and 2020, our WNC Regional DWI Task Force lobbied for Senate Bill 112, co-sponsored by Senators Jim Davis and Terri Van Duyn, which would have restored driving privileges, in some fashion, to those who completed the DWI Treatment Court. The bill failed, largely because of the poor understanding of some legislators of how recovery courts work.

Even though it is very disappointing that the new court is not available to the entire district, and I personally don't believe that to be fair, I hope that the people of Haywood County will greet this endeavor with joy, with curiosity, and with pride. These courts are the future of real justice for some individuals who are non-violent, and have encountered the system because of alcohol, or some other drug. Not everyone will be an appropriate candidate for the court, and not everyone will be successful, but for most, it is a lifesaving chance worth taking.

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