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## WINGS takes flight in county

Local specialty court treats and guides women who face prostitution charges

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When Cook County started a specialty court last year to help women charged with felony prostitution, officials designed the program for 25 participants to meet once a month.

Now the program features about 130 participants. And court runs on three Fridays every month.

Called Women In Need of Gender-specific Services (WINGS), the program targets the underlying issues that lead women to the commercial sex trade.

Those who choose to join the program typically face felonies due to prior misdemeanor prostitution convictions. They avoid a possible prison sentence by pleading guilty and starting a probation term that includes the two-year treatment program.

The women receive substance abuse treatment, trauma counseling, help to find safe housing, assistance with other legal matters they may face and job training services.

"The challenge is multi-faceted. The women themselves have a universe of problems — more problems than I observe in most of our population, including murderers," said Associate Judge Rosemary G. Higgins, who runs the court at the Leighton Criminal Court Building.

The treatment typically begins by addressing alcohol and drug additions.

"We learned that all of them have one or another. Rarely do I find a case where they don't," Higgins said.

Then the court helps the women find safe housing to escape pimp or domestic violence at home. Trauma counseling helps the wom-

en cope with the sexual and physical abuse that they've experienced.

And the program tries to help them find a job.

Assistant Public Defender Susan Mary Ehrlich said she thinks so highly of WINGS that she nominated Higgins for the "Promotion of Social Justice Award" that the Illinois Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers will issue in November.

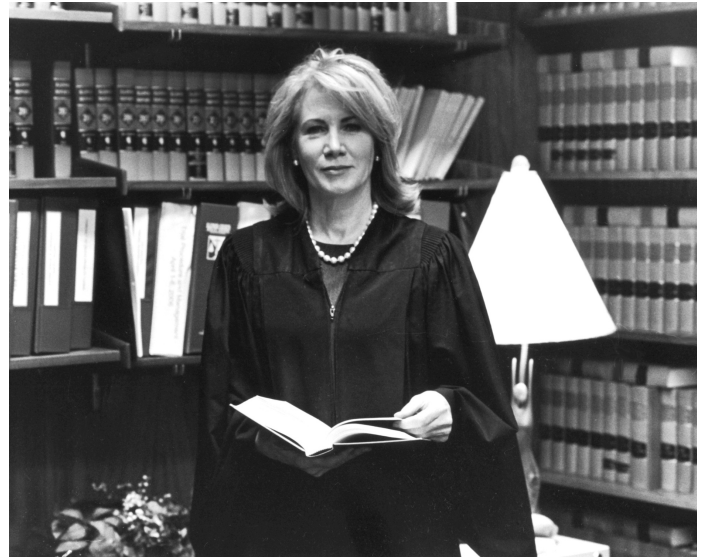
"It's a program that she can work with people and give them a second or third chance because no one else does," Ehrlich said. "She helps them with job leads, education, computer skills. And a lot of them don't have education or can't afford to finish their GED. This way, she's kind of helping them and helping society."

Ehrlich said Higgins brings the right mix of compassion and toughness to the bench.

"She comes from a huge Irish family and I don't think anything phases her," Ehrlich said.

"She's the first to jump off the bench and go hug somebody if they've successfully completed a 90-day sobriety program. She's not afraid of being human, but she

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Associate Judge Rosemary G. Higgins runs the Women In Need of Gender-specific Services (WINGS) court program at the Leighton Criminal Court Building. Photo courtesy of Peter Coolsen.

expects a lot. She'll crack the whip if she has to. So I think the girls know this is not only a good opportunity, but they know they're skating on thin ice."

Many women who start the program struggle to avoid drinking alcohol or using drugs.

"And we expect relapse to occur," Higgins said. "The question is whether or not they're willing to engage after that relapse."

Women whose ages range from 17 to 29 are less likely to choose the program compared to women who've already passed their 30th birthday.

"We can't force this program to work until they're ready to work it," Higgins said. "The older women, 30 and above, are more likely to grab the lifeline. They're aware that this may save their life."

Daria Mueller, associate director of policy at the advocacy organization known as the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, serves as a program consultant to the court.

"It's helped a lot of women, a lot of individuals who would have otherwise just been sentenced to (the Illinois Department of Corrections) and gone in, got out and turned around right back to what they came from," Mueller said.

"This is really offering so many women the opportunity to rebuild their lives, bit by bit, piece by piece — which is a struggle for these

women who have tons of trauma in their life or are dealing with poverty or a criminal record or drug addition, substance abuse and a lack of housing.

"Piece by piece, we're trying to give them the opportunity to rebuild their lives. Without this, the women would just be getting sentenced to IDOC and getting no help at all."

The program, which began in January 2011, will graduate its first participant next year.

In the meantime, Loyola University students collect data about the program participants — such as age, ethnicity, neighborhood and criminal history — to help better understand the women's lives.

The psychology and sociology students will study the program to help the court track success stories, women who get re-arrested and the services that work best for the participants.

"My research colleagues would say this is blasphemy, but I think the presence of the program is a success," said Arthur Lurigio, a criminal justice and psychology professor at Loyola.

"And it shows the court's sensitivity to the problems of people who become criminally involved. It shows we need to look beyond their criminal behavior and do a broad-based assessment of their behavioral health-care needs."

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