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## **New graduates mentor peers in drug program**

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The Douglas County Juvenile Court Family Treatment program recently celebrated the graduation of five more participants.

While that might not be big news to an outsider looking in, the trends that are developing more and more with graduates is drawing interest.

Program coordinator Jennifer King said more and more graduates are returning to the program to help others along. So far, she said, two graduates are participating in the Georgia Meth Project campaign, another has joined the PEPP program and two more have even become certified peer specialists.

"They are actually working with families now," she said. "One of them recently came up to court where she is the worker now. That was pretty cool."

Once people are in the program, Ms. King said, they can undergo serious lifestyle changes. The important thing, she said, is getting them in.

"What we have seen is people come to us for court and they don't know what is going on," she said. "The judge is there and they are being told they have to do all these things. When they walk out of there and time goes by we can get them in the program and walk them through the processes."

Participants do not always immediately see the program as means to an end, Case Manager Midge Roman-Ortiz said. Many times they must recover from the initial shock of their situation. However, she said, once they take the plunge the results are usually positive.

"There are so many people that believe that this cannot happen to them," she said. "Not only do we address their issues when they first come on board, we also help them re-evaluate themselves and then they can move forward in their education."

Ms. King said there are usually 16 participants in the program at a time, with a maximum of 20. The process can take up to two years, with less monitoring as participants progress.

Joining the program, Ms. King said, requires referrals and assessments of mental health, criminal history and other aspects. As motivation, progress earns rewards in the

form of gifts like picture frames, coupons and ordinary household items. These things, which Ms. King said many people take for granted, have proven to be great motivators.

“To them, that is major,” she said. “Sometimes if they don’t get one they are really affected by it that week. There are a lot of things we take for granted.”

Ms. King said the public can lend a hand providing these rewards through donations. Items like clothing, toiletries and other gifts are always needed.

Ms. Ramon-Ortiz said the more public support for the program the better. The clients, she said, are in need of all the support they can get to turn their lives around.

“No one, when they were born, has made a decision to become an addict,” she said. “Somewhere down the line something has happened to do that and that is what we need to look at.”