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Mental health court: In treatment, not behind bars

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According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 64 percent of jail inmates suffer from mental health problems.

Madison County is one of the few places in the country to address this growing problem with its very own mental health court.

It offers a second chance for people who may have been sick when they committed crimes. People like Gregory Kennemore.

"It's a beautiful program, and it gave me my life back," Kennemore told me.

A year and a half ago, his life almost hit rock bottom. Kennemore admits he wasn't on medication for his bipolar disorder, and he started committing crimes.

"I could be in prison, I could be incarcerated, not getting the help," he said.



But Kennemore was accepted into Judge Ruth Ann Hall's mental health court. It's a free year-long program for people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness and have committed a crime. If the participants follow strict guidelines like attending court twice a month and going to therapy, then their charges are dismissed.

To Judge Hall, it's about more than just those charges.

"If the person's homeless and the person has no way of getting to their mental health appointments or no way of supporting themselves, then how can we expect that they're not just going to come through a revolving door over and over again?" she asked.

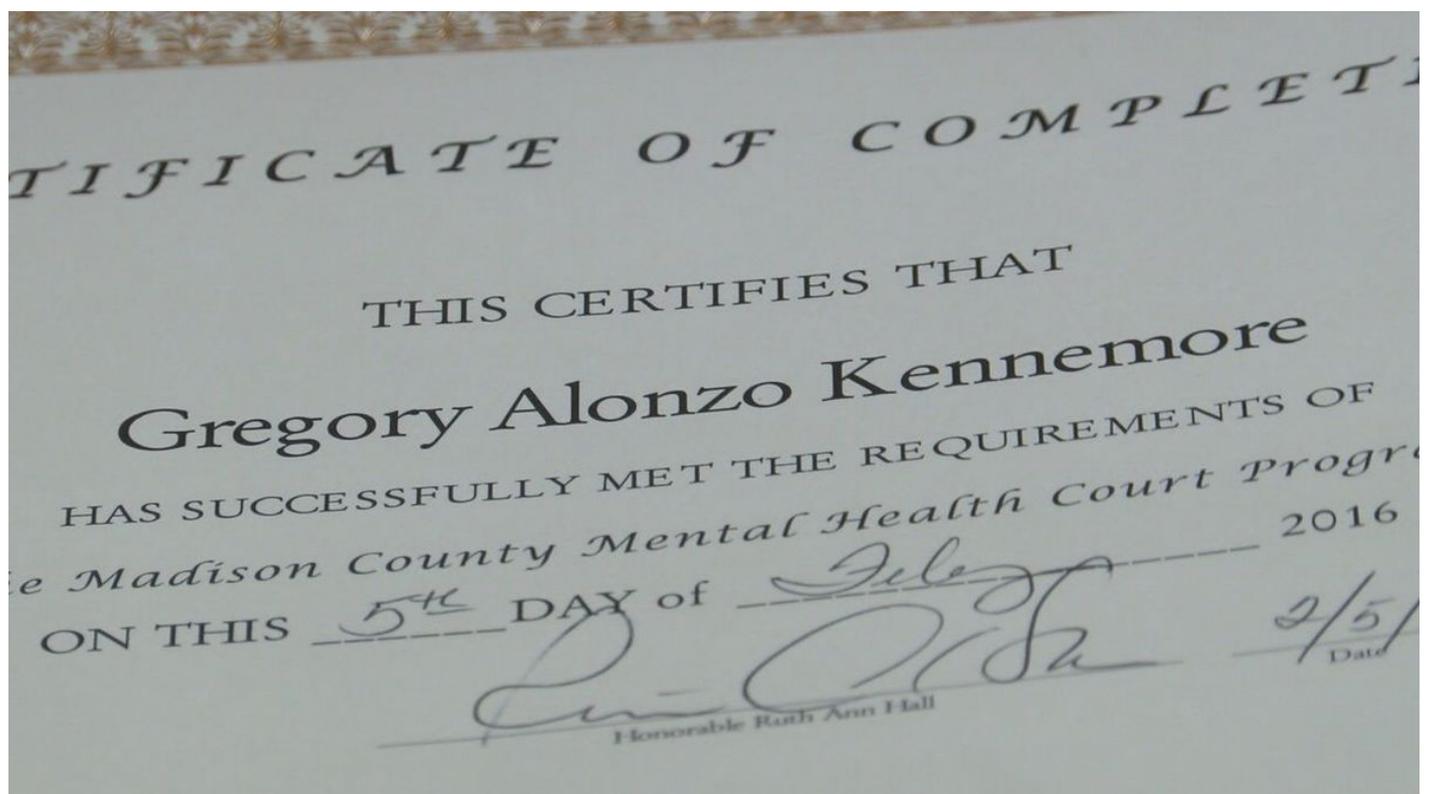
The court even goes as far as finding places for participants to live and giving them rides to doctor appointments. As you can imagine, it's not easy for the court to turn these patients' lives around. For the first five years, mental health court operated solely on a volunteer basis. With almost no funding, the court struggled to help pay for just the little things, like required drug testing.

"To require somebody to make the choice between whether they're compliant with the court and paying their bills, it's almost like you're setting them up to fail," Judge Hall said.

She almost shut down the program earlier this year, before the court was able to secure \$25,000 from the state, as well as \$30,000 from the Alabama Department of Economic Development and Community Affairs. She's also getting help for the program from Judge Patty Demos.

Despite the demands of mental health court, Judge Hall says the success stories make it worthwhile; like one young man who graduated from the program and still stays in touch.

"Every once in a while, I'll get a letter from him, and he's telling me how he's doing. It tickles me because he always signs it: one of yours," she said.



Kennemore is also one of hers, his charges now dismissed. I was there on Friday when he graduated and proudly shared plans to travel for the first time in a year to see his brother in California.

"There's only one kind of bird that don't fly, and that's a jailbird. She actually gave my wings back, so I'm gonna act like she gave my wings back, I'm gonna fly," he said.

And with that, Gregory Kennemore walked out of the Madison County Courthouse for the last time.

Cat Reid