

# Madison County Courts Change Protocol During Stay-At-Home Order

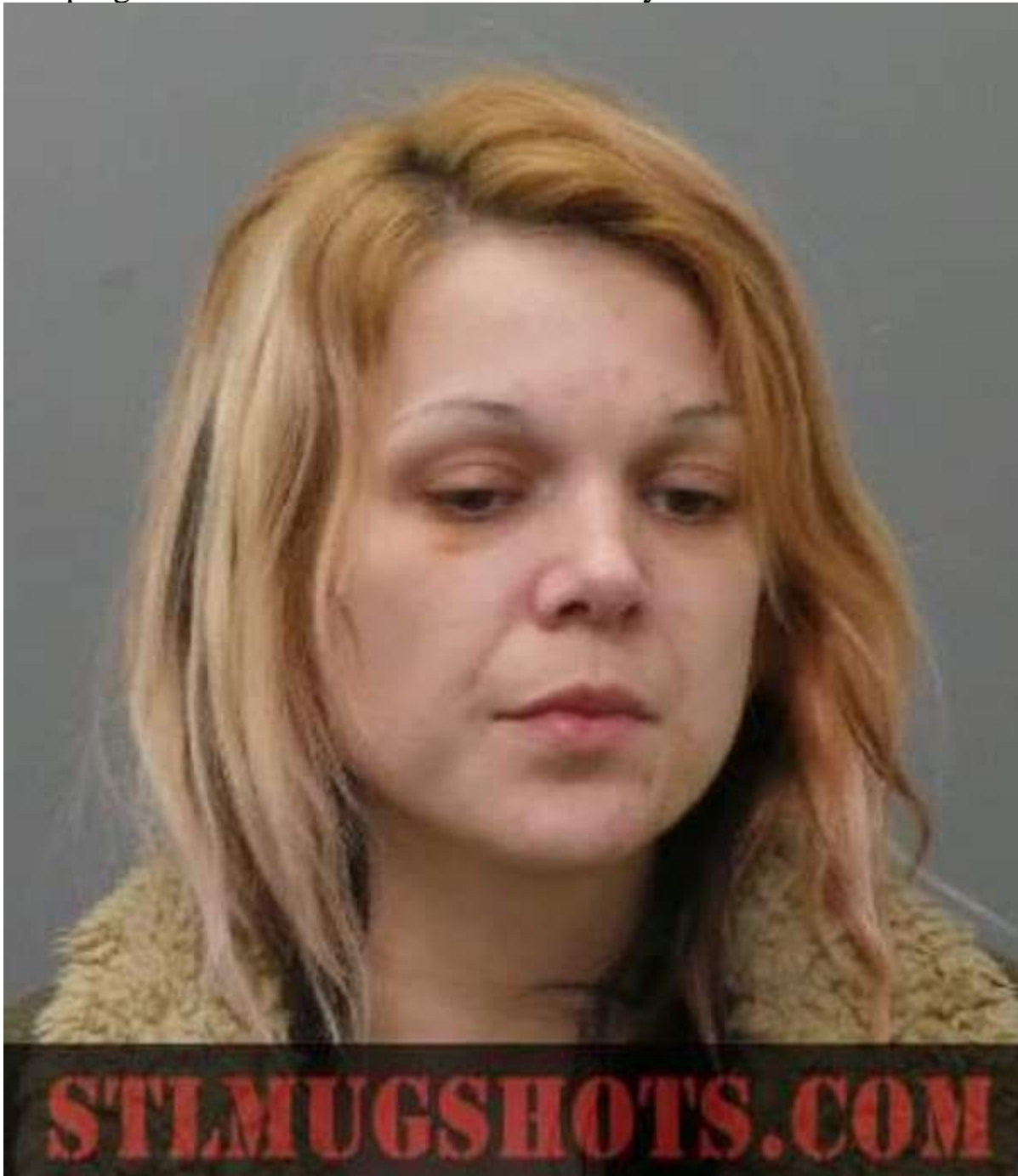
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In the wake of the continuing Stay-At-Home order throughout Illinois, which was issued as a precautionary measure to slow the spread of the deadly COVID-19, the Madison County Courts are having to change their protocol.

This is especially true in the Drug Court program. This program is the last stop on the road to prison for many people in Madison County, Illinois, who are struggling with addiction. This program offers addicts a chance to avoid prison in exchange for a sentence of court supervision and intense substance abuse treatment provided by

Chestnut Health Systems. The program was founded in the 1990s, when there were very few programs of it's kind found in the country.



Drug testing is the program's mainstay and is mandatory to ensure compliance with the 100 percent drug free policy that is required of all participants. Unfortunately, drug testing, as well as group and self help meetings, are currently suspended due to the social distancing, which prohibits groups of more than four people, at the recommendation of the CDC. The Madison County Drug Court administration declined to comment on the situation at this time.

Mark Kuni, former long-time addict who is currently in recovery, says the lack of drug tests doesn't bother him because he says, "I'm not doing this just because I'm in drug court, I'm doing this for me." Mark has been in and prison since he was 18, for drug related and other petty crimes and he says he just realized he didn't want that life anymore. When he was offered admittance into the Drug Court Reentry Program to avoid yet another prison sentence, he took it.

"Meetings are being done online and by phone for now," he says, which makes it possible to keep a support system in place through this pandemic. Mark understands how easy it would be, without the usual drug tests, to fall back into old habits, but for him, being sober is about more than just completing the program. Mark is determined to fix broken relationships and to build a new foundation to live his life on. Eventually, he hopes to help other people who are still in active addiction, showing them there is hope and they can find a life in recovery too. Right now though, he just hopes the ones out there partying will realize that this program is in place to help them, and by staying clean, even without the drug tests, they can continue their life of recovery and stop their pattern of addiction from bringing them down again.

Adam Ledbetter, another longtime addict who is in the third of five phases in the program, agrees with Mark. "Sobriety is a choice" Ledbetter explains. "It takes a lot of life changes to be able to live a sober life." He says the people you surround yourself with really do influence every choice you make "If you spend enough time in the barber shop, eventually you're going to get a haircut," he says. But he admits, not everyone in the program is as committed to their recovery as he and Mark are and this reprieve from drug testing is giving them the freedom to run back to their old ways. He says he has learned to keep his own sobriety; he can not let himself worry about those people though, instead concentrating only on himself.



Graduates of Drug Court, Cresenda Eichman and Lacy Rives, both credit the program for saving their life. Lacey, who graduated just this past May, admits though, the lack of testing is problematic. “The tests are what keep you accountable in the program.” She says that, unfortunately, many program participants are likely going to use this time, knowing they won’t be tested, to party. Lacey explained that to an addict, especially one new to recovery, this is “like a free pass to go get high and party.” She credits the accountability that Drug Court normally requires as being the key to its success and worries about the people who are not currently able to benefit from that aspect of the program. Even now, after three years of being in recovery, Lacey still attends meetings regularly and says she definitely misses the fellowship that comes from physically being with others in the support group setting.

The Drug Court Program has been beneficial to hundreds of people suffering from addiction since its beginning. This is a new challenge but, as it always does, it will find new ways to continue helping people as this pandemic continues. This also is a chance for the program to find ways to manage situations that may arise where in-person testing or meetings may not be an option, possibly allowing even more people to benefit in years to come.