



For Immediate Release

Harris County S.O.B.E.R. Courts address addiction, reduce recidivism with treatment program for individuals facing drunk driving charges

Graduates to be honored during Dec. 19 ceremony in conjunction with National Impaired Driving Prevention Month.

Dec. 15, 2022 — Facing a second charge of Driving While Intoxicated, Johnny Hernandez didn't really intend to embrace sobriety — he just needed to be sober long enough to complete his probation.

But it was a struggle. Marijuana was his weakness and he continued to smoke it, even as he racked up a string of failed drug tests and resulting community service hours. He figured it was a small price to pay as far as consequences go.

It ultimately took a short stay in the Harris County Jail — an intensifying consequence for failing his drug tests — to jolt his system.

"Other than getting processed in and out, it had been years since I'd done a stay in Harris County," said Hernandez, who is graduating this month from Harris County's S.O.B.E.R. Court after 18 months in the program. "Once I was in there, it made me realize, 'Wait a minute. I need to get my stuff together.'"

S.O.B.E.R. — Saving Ourselves By Education & Recovery — Court provides an intensive, four-phase intervention and treatment program for individuals who have been charged with misdemeanor Driving While Intoxicated and are at high risk of becoming repeat offenders.

The voluntary rehabilitation program includes therapeutic treatment and group counseling, drug and alcohol testing, curfews, electronic monitoring, and regular court hearings. All participants must commit to sobriety.

The goal of the misdemeanor specialty court is to address the root causes — like addiction and substance abuse — behind driving while intoxicated. Doing so helps not just the individual in the program, but the larger community by reducing the chances of recidivism, which boosts public safety.

"Most of what we handle is DWI second — one more arrest will trigger a felony charge and up to 10 years in prison. We need to nip it in the bud," said Judge Raul Rodriguez, who presides over one of the county's four misdemeanor S.O.B.E.R. Courts.

"That's why this program is really important. That's why I wanted to get involved. I wanted to do my best to show these individuals, 'You've got help.'"

'Something just clicks'

Harris County has four designated misdemeanor S.O.B.E.R. Courts — a general court, a court for women, a court for Spanish speakers, and a court for people 30 and under. Each is presided over by a different criminal misdemeanor court judge.

Judge Rodriguez, who sits on the bench of Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 13, presides over the S.O.B.E.R. Court for Spanish speakers. Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 12 Judge Genesis Draper presides over the women's group while Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 1 Judge Alex Salgado presides over the group for those 30 and under. Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 11 Judge Sedrick Walker presides over the general group.

The segmentation helps the participants feel more understood and willing to open up, knowing they're surrounded by people facing similar issues, the judges said.

"I have an all-female group, which provides a level of comfort and intimacy." Judge Draper said, explaining that the group often has conversations about difficult women's issues. "We support people through rehab and sobriety in a very intimate way. You don't get that in regular court."

S.O.B.E.R. Court can feel overwhelming for some at the outset. Participants must complete an intensive outpatient program that includes six hours a week in person plus homework. On top of that, they have to report for drug testing, check in with their probation officers, adhere to curfews, and schedule regular calibration of their ignition interlock — an in-car breathalyzer that they must blow into before starting the ignition to ensure they're driving sober.

"The treatment really is the biggest component. It's hard to overcome these addictions without having that piece," Judge Walker said. "As much as people want to stop cold turkey, it's hard to do that without help."

The program can last up to two years, though the timeline is largely dependent upon each person and how well they work their way through the program. The first two phases are generally the longest as participants learn the program and use the tools to get sober.

"Some people have a very rough start. And then something just clicks — they get it, and they graduate," Judge Salgado said. "Those stories are uplifting. It gives you hope for the next person."

The four courts celebrate participants' progress and sobriety with quarterly joint graduation ceremonies, the next of which is set for Dec. 19 in conjunction with National Impaired Driving Prevention Month. For some, graduating from the program, or even promoting from one phase to another, is one of their first real accomplishments.

Hernandez is among them.

"It gives me joy knowing I'm a graduate," Hernandez said, noting that he had dropped out of high school. "It makes me feel like I accomplished something."

Sober Johnny

It was Hernandez's second DWI charge that ultimately led him to S.O.B.E.R. Court.

He and a co-worker had a few drinks after finishing work on a Saturday. He planned to Uber home so he declined a ride offered by his co-worker's son. But at some point, he said, that plan changed.

Blackout drunk, Hernandez said he has no recollection of getting the truck, opening the gate to the property, or closing it behind him. Once on the road, he hit a car, he said, and then, while trying to get away, drove into a wall. He ended up in S.O.B.E.R. Court.

"It was very frustrating. I was trying to be the regular me and still do the things I was doing," the 43-year-old said, recalling his stubbornness and refusal to get sober at the beginning of the program. "And it was a handful because it took a lot of time."

His wake-up call came during his brief jail stay. With no access to marijuana and lots of time to think, Hernandez emerged with a new mindset — he was sober and wanted to stay that way, he said.

He quickly noticed a difference. He felt healthier. His mind was clearer. His wife and kids seemed happier. And income from his small business nearly doubled as he was able to take on more work.

“Honestly, if I wouldn’t have been on probation, I don’t think I would be sober right now,” Hernandez said. “Things happen for a reason, they say.”

With graduation at hand and his probation up in just four months, Hernandez said he feels good about the future. He’s since told his brother about S.O.B.E.R. Court and encouraged him to stop drinking and sober up, too.

“I was under the influence for a long time,” said Hernandez, who has worked in the event industry for the past 25 years. “In the industry I’m in ... everybody knew me as a pothead. Now people are getting to know me as Sober Johnny.”

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