

STEP Program Graduates Build Life Skills and May Get Off Supervised Release Early

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By [William Cracraft](#)



U.S. Magistrate Judge Alexander C. Ekstrom; Jose Vargas, deputy chief U.S. probation officer; and Phil Casey, U.S. probation officer, all of the Eastern District of Washington.

The Eastern District of Washington has developed a program to help individuals on federal supervision get their lives on track and leave supervision earlier. The Sobriety Treatment and Education Program (STEP) reentry program is for individuals on federal supervision who have substance addictions. Clients must stay away from drugs and alcohol, try hard to find employment and stay employed, reestablish relationships with family members, pursue educational opportunities and attend to their overall health and well-being to stay in the program.

Kyle Ward graduated from the program June 5, 2024, and is positive about the program and the boost it has given him: he has his addiction under control and discovered he is good at social work. "I'm now a house manager at a treatment facility and I've been here about eight months. It is a paid position and in an in-patient facility. Now, I am on

the front lines with everybody. I get to see people who were in my position when I came in. I used to work in manual labor jobs and social work has been pretty good to me," he said.

The program was founded by Senior District Court Judge Wm. Fremming Nielsen in 2007 and began as a cooperative effort between the U.S. District Court, the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Office, the U.S. Attorney's Office and the Federal Defender's Office. The initial program started in Spokane, the seventh such federal reentry program in the United States. U. S. District Judge Mary K. Dimke handles the Richland STEP cases, U.S. Magistrate Judge James A. Goeke now handles the Spokane program after a hand-off in Fall of 2023 from Judge Nielsen and U.S. Magistrate Judge Alexander C. Ekstrom oversees STEP cases in Yakima.

Jose Vargas, deputy chief probation officer in the district, has been a probation officer for 23 years and managed the STEP program for several years. Program entrants have to have an identified substance abuse or addiction issues and have to be committed to long term sobriety. "It is a voluntary program so they have to choose to get into the program and they have to have at least one year of supervision remaining. Honesty is a big piece of the program as well," said Vargas.

When the program started, "We wouldn't allow folks with violent crime to be admitted, but several years ago we made a change where we now allow folks into the program who have committed a violent crime, but the team has the option of not providing them with the incentive of receiving the year off, and the clients know that up front," he said.

From the officers' point of view, "The most challenging part is trying to gain their trust, to develop that rapport with the client, that we are there to help them as much as possible through the process. That is extremely difficult to do with individuals who are coming into the system on supervision. There is that lack of trust," he added.

There are other challenges, of course, like limited housing and transportation for individuals who live in rural areas, said Vargas. "As much as we would like to help them out with those resources, we have limited resources for those ends."

Judge Ekstrom agrees with Vargas that the toughest aspect of the program from his point of view is "convincing a participant that you actually care about them and thus to trust you. This takes time and it is incumbent on each member of the team to be patient," he said.

Judge Ekstrom comes at the program with sympathy. "I have family members in recovery and those who haven't yet made it," he said. "I have seen what (recovery) can do for people. I also have no illusions: not everybody makes it. The reward is a person regaining many things they have lost, and for our society, having someone rejoin us. You manage the inherent risk to society of people's participation, and work with them as long as you can."

He believes the program is important. "Criminal law is an extraordinarily blunt tool for addressing both chemical dependency and mental health," he said. "It is all sticks and

no carrots. If you send someone back into the community with the same limited resources and protective factors, you can't be surprised when they return. STEP seeks to change behavior by creating a catalyst for change. By changing the conditions, expectations, and options for participants you can hope for incremental personal change they can build on."

The toughest piece for clients, said Vargas, is "being able to develop a good support system. It is difficult for them to break away from their old peers and associates — negative peers and associates — and start developing that new peer group that is pro-social," he said. "Obviously employment and education are also a challenge for them while they are on supervision. Trying to get them engaged with employment services or education services is challenging because it is something new for them."

For Ward, the hardest part was "moral recognition therapy (MRT) which is mandatory for STEP court," he said. "It is a treatment course. We go through 12 steps and the 12 steps are pretty in-depth. They help change our moral values and it takes time. I had class once a week and with the full-time schedule, sometimes it was a little harder to get a step a week but then I also had community service hours so was fitting that in. I feel good about it. I really liked MRT. It places my life in a different perspective."

One thing that was easier than expected was "staying clean," Ward said. "I had some good words from Judge Ekstrom. At one point, where I was letting myself use and get high and relapse, he finally gave me the ultimatum of 'you have to have perfect compliance or you go back to jail' talk, and then it stopped. I had all my tools and everything there, I just needed that extra little push."

"It is interesting to hear Kyle's memory of our interaction in the first few weeks of the program," said Judge Ekstrom. "My memory is also that we put him on what we call perfect compliance because he would not stop using, and when we have someone like that we eventually have to take them into custody and get them into, or back into, in-patient treatment. However, I recall telling Kyle at length that he was letting himself use, and that he could always find an excuse to use in the world."

"He needed to be able to make a decision to stay clean. I challenged him to not give himself permission. I thought I was being pretty hard on him and was worried that he would overreact. He came back early the next week a different person and I am very proud of him. He is one of the most impressive examples of change I have seen. It does not surprise me that the possibility of going to jail still sticks out as primary to him. In the end, we can catalyze change, but we don't create it. We, and by that I mean Phil Casey and every other member of the team, provide conditions the allow participants to do the work themselves," said Judge Ekstrom.

To set the client up for success, "We front load the first part of the program for phase one and two for treatment services," said Vargas. "Whether it is substance abuse or mental health services, we engage them in those services first. In phases three and four the focus starts to shift towards employment and education."

Three U.S. probation officers handle STEP clients: Phil Casey in Yakima, Melissa Hanson in Spokane and Maria Balles in Richland. Vargas noted there is an additional incentive for participants who successfully complete the program and receive their one year off. "The officers have the discretion at any time after they successfully complete and receive their year off, depending on the amount of time they have remaining on supervision to submit an early termination request to the court," he said.

More than just a supervisor, Casey has been critical to Ward's success. "He's actually been very helpful," said Ward. "There was this one moment where I was working on my car, and my car caught on fire. Originally, I got arrested for arson, burning down a truck and a house, that worried me a little bit. It wasn't me intentionally catching my car on fire, there was a fuel injector leak and the engine caught on fire. I had to call the fire department, the fire engines came out, the police came out, and I'm kind of panicking and worried, and Phil Casey was very kind-hearted and joking about it and he said, 'you did nothing wrong, you're fine' and he actually helped me move my car."

The program has graduated 166 participants, including Ward. There are currently 20 individuals enrolled in Spokane, seven in Yakima, and five in Richland, and all programs have clients approaching graduation. The program's success rate is "probably around 65% at this time," said Vargas. But the missing 35% did not necessarily relapse. "We have folks that actually drop out for legitimate reasons," said Vargas. "They obtain new employment and because of the (scheduling) conflict they choose to remove themselves from the program. They continue the treatment services and are engaged in the same treatment programs; they just opt out of the program because they are unable to take time away from their new job."

Ward ran into that very conflict but chose to stick with the full program. "I was turned down for a promotion because I wasn't flexible enough with my schedule," he said. "They required me to have a Sunday-Monday or Friday-Saturday off, but I told them that due to my MRT meetings I couldn't do it—I had set my boundaries and was not able to do that at the moment. They said that's fine, that's okay but later on in life when you are able to, we can look at this other position for you. They have hope for me."

Ward recommends the program. "If you believe you are ready for it -- when you are sure and ready, this is the place to go," he said.

<https://www.ca9.uscourts.gov/circuit-executive/step-program/>