

First group graduates from Operation Rio Grande drug court

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By Sean Moody

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SALT LAKE CITY — More than a year after the beginning of Operation Rio Grande, 15 people have graduated from the program's first drug court.

The 15 people were arrested as part of the program aimed at preventing homelessness in the Rio Grande district of Salt Lake City.

Cedric Willis said he had lost his job and was on the streets when he was arrested in 2017.

"I was out there and just lost," Willis said.

Willis qualified for the drug court program established for Operation Rio Grande. The program allows people to enter a guilty plea, which is then held in abeyance while the person completes the drug court program. Upon completion of the program, the charges are dismissed. After 52 weeks of treatment, Willis and 14 others graduated from the program Wednesday evening.

"It means that I have a stable foundation. It means that I'm able to be productive and return back to society as a registered voter and do positive things in the community," Willis said.

Willis has a job now, and so does his fellow graduate Destiny Garcia. She works in the Salt Lake County mayor's office.



"This is a game-changer to me. This is life changing," Garcia said.

Garcia said she was arrested on an outstanding warrant. If it had not been for the Operation Rio Grande drug court program, she said she likely would not have gotten treatment.

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–Cedric Willis, Operation Rio Grande drug court graduate

At the ceremony, each graduate stood at the podium with a friend or family member who talked about how things had changed for them. Garcia brought her son, Isaiah, to the front of the crowded auditorium. She recalled the moment she called her family to tell them she was entering treatment. "I called my family and my son said, 'Mom, I'm so proud of you and I love you.' That's all I had to hear for me to continue my journey," she said.

Isaiah said the difference in his mother since she went into treatment has been stark.

"Most importantly, she's happy. I've seen a huge change from her, and I owe that to all you guys here who did this operation," he said.

While the Wednesday evening ceremony was an important milestone for those 15 people and their families, some say Operation Rio Grande's organizers have not focused enough on treatment. The Utah chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union released a paper titled "Calculating the Real Cost of Operation Rio Grande." The organization argues the vast majority of people arrested through the operation have not been put on a better path.

"With ORG (Operation Rio Grande) designed as a hammer, we predicted 14 months ago that everyone it touched would be treated like a nail," the paper read.

Calling it a "hammer" that has treated people experiencing homelessness and drug addiction like "nails," the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah issued a draft report Tuesday criticizing Operation Rio Grande's results thus far.

The ACLU said the efforts have had too much of a focus on law-enforcement as opposed to treatment options.

"Since August 2017, more than 5,024 people have been arrested due to Operation Rio Grande, with 79 percent of them picked up for misdemeanors or active warrants. During the same period, local social service agencies added 243 new treatment beds, while 120 individuals pled into a new drug court. The 13-to-1 imbalance is a direct result of the law-enforcement dominance of ORG from its inception," the paper read.

Salt Lake County Mayor Ben McAdams said there is still work to be done on Operation Rio Grande, but that they were making progress.

"I understand the report. At the same time, I'm proud of what we've accomplished. We're holding accountable those people who are committing crime on our streets and yet we're showing them a door to a different way of life," McAdams said.

Utah Speaker of the House Greg Hughes was frustrated by the paper.

"I wouldn't even call it a 'report,'" Hughes said. "It's misleading. It is not accurate. It would suggest that I or policymakers are a 'hammer,' and the people that you'll see at this drug court graduation tonight, they belittle them as 'nails.'"

Hughes took issue with numbers in the ACLU paper, saying they do not accurately portray how much effort is being put into treatment.

"When they count beds, they lead someone to believe that's a person. Many people can be in those beds," he said.

The Utah chapter of the ACLU will hold a panel discussion on the topic Thursday evening at 6:30 at the Centro Civico Mexicano. The panel will include Catholic Community Services Director of Homeless Services Matt Melville, public defender Kate Conyers, Odyssey House CEO Adam Cohen, and Salt Lake City Police Chief Mike Brown.