

# The Seattle Times



## LEAD program turns drug bust into help, not jail

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January 2, 2013



*Seattle police Sgt. Tom Yoon drives around Belltown during a buy-bust operation on a "green-light" night where spots in the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program are offered to select arrestees. The program offers drug treatment and social help.*

Seattle's groundbreaking LEAD program diverts low-level drug dealers and users away from the criminal-justice system. At the police officer's discretion, some of those arrested are referred to social workers for immediate help — a hot meal, a safe place to sleep — and longer-term services such as drug treatment and job training.

An undercover Seattle police officer, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, walked north on Third Avenue in Belltown. "Trailer" officers followed him on foot, providing a play-by-play of his movements over their police radios.

Parked a couple blocks away, Sgt. Tom Yoon monitored the radio chatter as the buy-bust operation played out. The undercover officer gave the "good buy" sign and a team of bike cops moved in to arrest a 47-year-old woman who had just sold him \$20 worth of crack cocaine.

"Well, that took all of two minutes," Yoon said.

As he maneuvered his black Ford Crown Victoria to the spot on Third where Sgt. Brian Kraus and his night-bike squad had the woman in handcuffs, Yoon mused aloud that she might be a good candidate for the city's year-old Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program

Yoon, who supervises the West Precinct's Anti-Crime Team, would turn out to be right.

Most nights, arresting drug dealers and users in Belltown is "like shooting fish in a barrel," said Kraus. The majority get a one-way ride to the King County Jail.

But this particular Friday happened to be a "green-light night," one of a handful of random shifts each month when Yoon, Kraus and Sgt. Ryan Long can divert addicts and low-level dealers into an innovative program that represents a radical departure from the long prison sentences and court-ordered drug-treatment programs of the past 20 years.

In a break from the arrest-and-book status quo, the LEAD program cuts out the criminal-justice system and assigns participants to social workers. It is designed to offer immediate help — a hot meal, a warm coat, a safe place to sleep — as well as longer-term services for drug treatment, stable housing and job training.

The aim of LEAD is to remove frequent fliers — those constantly arrested and rearrested on drug charges — from the criminal-justice system, said King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg, whose office helped create the program. At the same time, LEAD helps participants make lasting changes in their lives while recognizing that "drugs can have a powerful grip on a person," he said.

"There are a lot of good people who lose their way to drugs who wouldn't otherwise be criminally oriented," and those are the people LEAD seeks to help, Satterberg said.

Violent felons, people wanted on warrants and dealers caught carrying more than three grams of dope don't qualify.

What makes the program so different from anything that's ever been tried in the U.S. is that front-line cops decide who gets in.

The nearly 80 people active in LEAD aren't required to abstain from using drugs, nor are they kicked out of the program if they relapse. Instead, they're allowed to set their own goals — and are then given the support and resources they need to achieve them.

"Once you're in LEAD, you're always in LEAD, unless our [operational] group votes them out," said Yoon. No one has been voted out so far.

Participants include a woman pregnant with twins who wants her sons to have childhoods far different from her own; and a former track star who squandered a dozen years on the streets but is now working to do right by his parents and 5-year-old daughter.

While it's too soon to know if the program will be a success, the cops, prosecutors, defense attorneys and social-service providers involved in its creation say LEAD has made partners out of adversaries and given rise to all kinds of relationships that didn't exist before its launch last fall.

## **Back to the beginning**

Beginning in the early 1990s, after state legislators passed a series of tough-on-crime sentencing laws, street-level drug crimes "represented more than one-third of the felony cases" handled by the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, said Satterberg.

"For decades we've been putting thousands of people in prison for long periods of time, and I can't say looking back that had any impact on drug users or on the street drug scene," he said.

In the early 2000s, The Defender Association — a Seattle public-defense firm — began filing lawsuits that sparked heated court battles with the Seattle Police Department over allegations that selective enforcement in drug cases sent disproportionately high numbers of African Americans to prison.

Between 2001 and 2008, litigation by the association's Racial Disparity Project involving black defendants charged with drug-delivery crimes ultimately led to having the cases dismissed or charges reduced for all of them.

After those courtroom victories, Lisa Daugaard, the association's deputy director, sat down with Satterberg and police Capt. Steve Brown to discuss a new approach to enforcing drug laws.

Those conversations led to the creation of LEAD — and a partnership between Satterberg and Daugaard's offices, Seattle police, the King County Sheriff's Office, Seattle's City Attorney's Office, American Civil Liberties Union of Washington, city and county government, as well as members of local neighborhood and business associations.

Private foundations, led by the Ford Foundation, agreed to fund the \$950,000-a-year, four-year pilot program.

The LEAD group makes all of its decisions by consensus. A smaller operational group — which includes Yoon, Daugaard and Ian Goodhew, Satterberg's deputy chief of staff — meet every two weeks to discuss the progress of individual participants and troubleshoot problems as they arise.

A similar program is soon to be launched in Skyway.

"This is one of the most innovative approaches to drug enforcement in the country and it's likely to improve outcomes, cost less and reduce racial inequality," Daugaard said.

LEAD is based on a "harm-reduction philosophy" of meeting someone where they are, rather than dictating a one-size-fits-all fix to their problems, said Daugaard.

That approach "often proves to be the most enduring way to change behavior because you're working with someone's internal motivation," as opposed to forcing them to "respond to external penalties and rewards," she said.

Because addiction can be so potent, and the lure of fast money so enduring, police often end up arresting the same people over and over again — and those costs quickly add up.

Each felony-drug arrest that results in a guilty plea costs taxpayers an estimated \$3,500 to \$7,500, not including jail or prison time, according to Clif Curry, an analyst for the Metropolitan King County Council. Cases that go to trial typically cost more.

On average, someone convicted of their second or third felony-drug crime will spend a year in prison — at a cost of almost \$33,000 per inmate. Jail stays are even costlier, averaging about \$72,000 per inmate per year, Curry said.

It's still too early to know what kind of savings can be expected as a result of LEAD, but early indicators look promising.

Of the 86 people referred to LEAD since its launch, 76 are considered "active participants," a number that includes people who are no longer financially dependent on the program, said Kris Nyrop, the project director for The Defender Association's Racial Disparity Project.

The other 10 failed to show up for intensive-intake assessments — one of LEAD's only requirements — and were dropped from the program.

Forty-two percent of all active participants decided on their own to enter drug treatment and 12 of the 76 have already completed employment training or landed a job, Nyrop said. A handful have left Seattle for work, including a couple of participants who are in China working in ship demolition and decontamination.

"They're now independent and self-sufficient," he said.

### **A new start**

Eva Bible, 28, said LEAD has given her a chance at a new life.

When Bible was 12, she and her 10 siblings were taken from their parents. She ran back to them every chance she got.

Emancipated at 16, she went to school and worked but never made enough to cover rent. She dropped out of school, slept on buses and started selling drugs to support herself.

Since agreeing to participate in LEAD after her arrest in April, Bible got three or four jobs — but those offers were all revoked after employers ran criminal-background checks on her.

"There's been plenty of times I felt like giving up," said Bible, who is pregnant with twins due in February. Though she hasn't been able to land a job yet, Bible is enrolled in a GED program and aspires to go to college so she can work with foster children. She recently moved into a two-bedroom apartment.

"This is the first program I've been in and I'm sticking with it because it was my option," she said. "I'm getting the help I actually need."

Though Jeremy Bradford has been arrested plenty of times, it was a social contact with Officer Randy Jokela — a bicycle cop known on the streets as "Officer Joker" — that led Bradford to become one of the first participants in LEAD.

"Officer Joker told me about it. He said, 'I hate seeing you on the streets, screwing up, when you have so much potential,' " Bradford, 43, recalled, standing next to the food truck his parents own and he manages outside Grocery Outlet at Martin Luther King Jr. Way and Union Street.

A track star at Roosevelt High School, Bradford said he worked as a recruiter for the Marines, sold real estate, and later, men's suits at Nordstrom.

"I wanted to live on the wild side for a while, I wanted to be irresponsible for a while," Bradford said, which is how he ended up on the streets in his early 30s.

The night after Bradford was accepted into LEAD, he was back on the streets, looking for drugs. He saw some old high-school friends out for dinner in Belltown but made sure they didn't see him. The encounter made him realize how far he'd fallen.

Finally, a question posed by his 5-year-old daughter, Nevaeh — "Daddy, what's the streets?" — made him embrace the chance he'd been given. Nevaeh lives with Bradford's parents, but Bradford hopes to one day regain custody. "I'd been to inpatient (treatment) before, but it was always court-ordered," he said. "This is the first time I actually asked to go to treatment."

Back at the West Precinct, Yoon ran a background check on the woman who had just sold his undercover officer \$20 worth of crack. With no violent felonies or warrants on her record, Yoon determined she qualified for LEAD.

He propped open the door to a holding cell, briefly told the woman about the program, and asked if she would like to participate. She quickly agreed.

Yoon called Eileen Corcoran and Tim Candela, caseworkers at REACH, a Belltown agency that works under Evergreen Treatment Services to provide services to LEAD participants. They arrived at the precinct and conducted a brief interview with the woman before escorting her back to their office. The woman opted to spend the night in a women's homeless shelter.

Though she's had her struggles and hasn't entered into drug treatment, she's "doing pretty good at this point in the game," Corcoran later said.

Yoon and his officers on the Anti-Crime Team know there's a good chance people who get referred to LEAD will relapse.

But the program has been around long enough for positive news to start flowing back to the officers.

Officer Matt Pasquan was at a Starbucks in Pioneer Square when a man rapped on the window, then came inside to shake his hand. It wasn't until the man showed Pasquan his ID that the officer remembered busting him for smoking crack six months earlier.

"He looked normal," instead of haggard, Pasquan said of the encounter that was unlike any other in his 11 ½-year career. "It was a night-and-day difference. I wouldn't have recognized him at all."