

Program aims to help rather than incarcerate certain offenders

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Special to The Gazette

Some low-level offenders at risk of arrest in Gaston County are being given a chance to avoid prosecution and jail by voluntarily participating in a program to help them address the behavioral health concerns that led to

the interaction with police.

The program is called LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion), and program coordinator Adrien Sanders told members of the Belmont Rotary Club about the effort when she spoke at a recent meeting.

Substance use disorder, sex work activity, homelessness, poverty and

mental health concerns are some of the most likely reasons people come in contact with the LEAD program, Sanders said.

“The program is designed for people who keep encountering law enforcement and have barriers to receiving the help they need to move their lives in a different direction,” she added.

LEAD originated in Seattle, Washington, in 2011, and began in Gaston County on Aug. 31, 2023, after the county received a \$1.2 million grant from the Bureau of Justice Administration. The program now has a staff of three, with 14 active cases.

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Program

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The program operates through the Gaston County Police Department now, but Sanders said she hopes it will be expanded to include municipal law enforcement departments.

Most cases are referred to LEAD by a police officer who could arrest someone who needs help and is willing to cooperate to get it. But other community organizations can also make referrals.

"We are out and about meeting people where they are, not sitting in an office," Sanders said.

When an offender accepts being referred to the LEAD program, charges

are not filed but are put on hold.

"If there's a baby step being taken, we're working with them," she said. "We don't remove anyone from the program, but we can change their status to inactive, if they are not participating."

To help case managers meet the immediate needs of program participants, the LEAD program welcomes donations of bottled water, sports drinks, packs of crackers/trail mix, and non-perishable, microwaveable, individual-serving sized foods such as soup and macaroni. Donations of gift cards to fast food restaurants, grocery stores and big-box retailers are also appreciated.

For more information on the LEAD program, go to gastongov.com/1182/Law-Enforcement-Assisted-Diver-

sion-LEAD.

About Rotary: Rotary is an international service organization with 1.4 million members in more than 200 countries. "Service Above Self" is the Rotary motto. Rotarians work together to promote peace, fight disease, support education, grow local economies and protect the environment.

Belmont Rotary Club, which will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2025, meets for lunch and a program on local topics each Wednesday, 12:30 - 1:30 p.m., at the First Presbyterian Church in Belmont. Guests interested in learning more about local businesses and issues and how Rotary serves the community are welcome. For more information, visit belmontrotaryclub.com.



(From left) LEAD Program Coordinator Adrien Sanders stands with Rotarian Mike Giang, who hosted the program, special guest Belmont Abbey College Rotaract Club Vice President Anthony Ruttler, and Belmont Rotary Immediate Past President Whitney Norton. PHOTO PROVIDED BY TED HALL.