

Breaking Our Addiction to Prison



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Our traditional justice system has been inadequate to the task of breaking the cycle of substance abuse and crime. Four out of every five offenses are committed by someone with a drug or alcohol problem; and we just keep locking them up!

In just the past 20 years alone, state prison systems have added 1 million new cells to incarcerate the 2.3 million adults now behind bars in the U.S. That's far more than any other country on the globe with 1 out of every 100 adult Americans currently serving time.¹ Approximately one-half of these individuals are addicted to drugs or alcohol² and most do not pose a serious threat to public safety.

Prison for these individuals has accomplished little to stem the tide of crime or substance abuse. Upon their release from prison, two thirds of drug abusers commit a new crime³ and virtually all relapse quickly to drug abuse.⁴ And yet, despite these disappointing figures national expenditures on corrections well exceed \$60 billion annually.⁵ On average, states spend \$65,000 per bed, per year to build new prisons and \$23,876 per bed, per year to operate them. Despite the staggering cost to incarcerate these individuals, most return to their communities without treatment, without jobs and without hope.

Given the abysmal outcomes of incarceration on addictive behavior, there's absolutely no justification for state governments to continue to waste tax dollars feeding a situation where generational recidivism is becoming the norm and parents, children and grandparents may find themselves locked up together.

Author Judge Dennis Challeen (ret.) said it best about sending the addicted to prison:

We want them to have self-worth

So we destroy their self-worth

We want them to be responsible

So we take away all responsibility

We want them to be positive and constructive

So we degrade them and make them useless

We want them to be trustworthy

So we put them where there is no trust

We want them to be non-violent

So we put them where violence is all around them

We want them to be kind and loving people

So we subject them to hatred and cruelty

We want them to quit being the tough guy

So we put them where the tough guy is respected

We want them quit hanging around losers

So we put all the losers in the state under one roof

We want them to quit exploiting us

So we put them where they exploit each other

We want them to take control of their lives, own problems and quit being a parasite on society

So we make them totally dependent on us

An Investment Beginning to be Realized

The verdict is in on Drug Courts. It has been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that Drug Courts work. Drug Courts significantly reduce drug abuse and crime and do so at less expense than any other justice strategy.

That is why the historic 1994 Biden Crime Bill authorized \$1 billion for the Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program, administered by the Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs. The intent of the Biden Crime Bill at the time was to expand Drug Court funding to \$200 million annually by the year 2000. Unfortunately the DOJ federal appropriation has averaged only \$40 million and saw its lowest level in 2006 at a mere \$10 million.

The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment within the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has also supported Drug Courts through its discretionary funding. But it, too, is drastically under-funded with a meager \$10 million a year available to enhance treatment services within Drug Court programs.

That is all changing. Earlier this year, Congress approved \$64 million for Drug Courts; the highest federal appropriation for the program in its 20 year history. And President Obama has plans to take the ball further up field. In the Administration's budget for 2010, there is potentially \$118 million for Drug Courts.

How Much Money Is Needed?

Drug Courts need \$250 million per year for the next six years--essentially as was originally envisioned in the Crime Bill -- in order to put a Drug Court within reach of the 1.2 million adult offenders who need it and to truly begin to heal America's number one social problem...addiction.

What Will be the Return on the Investment?

A \$250 million annual Federal investment would reap staggering savings, with an estimated annual return of as much as \$840 million in net benefits from avoided criminal justice costs alone and another 2.2 billion in savings to our communities. A \$250 million annual Federal investment would also substantially reduce the demand for illicit drugs and enable state and local governments to cease over-relying on expensive and ineffective prison sentences for nonviolent, addicted offenders.

If the past is any indication of the future, state and local governments can be expected to follow suit and leverage the Federal investment several-fold. In these down-turn economic times, there is no way to be certain whether the states will be able to continue to leverage Federal dollars at a 9:1 ratio as they have done in the past. But once states began to realize cost-offsets from criminal justice and prison expenditures, state funding can be reapportioned to expand and sustain Drug Courts. Assuming even a modest 5:1 state investment, a \$250 million annual Federal investment could leverage as much as \$1.25 billion in state funding.

Drug Courts are just good common CENTS! For more information about Drug Courts, go to www.allrise.org.