

Jail shouldn't be the first option, and it isn't (4.23.06)

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Jail shouldn't be the first option, and it isn't

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Do we in Wisconsin tend to "warehouse" prisoners rather than seek more creative, less expensive and potentially more effective alternatives?

This topic will be discussed at 5:30 this afternoon at Lake Street United Methodist Church at a meeting titled, "Do We Really Need a County Jail?"

This matter affects us all. Tax dollars we spend locking people up is money we can't spend on education, roads, health care for the needy, etc. And as the county moves forward with a proposal to build a \$50 million courthouse-jail expansion, our property tax bills would go up further to pay for it.

It's well documented neighboring Minnesota locks up considerably fewer of its citizens than we do, even though our populations and demographics are similar. Wisconsin went on a prison building binge in the 1990s, including new facilities in Stanley and Jackson County in this area. Some communities competed for prisons as a form of economic development.

The Rev. Paul Oppedahl, associate pastor of Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, noted in a recent Leader-Telegram article that our prison population grew from 11,000 in 1995 to 22,000 a decade later. He is one of the organizers of today's meeting.

Oppedahl believes we should invest more in treatment programs that hopefully would reduce the need for incarceration, which in turn would reduce the need to keep building more prison cells. It's a good concept that can only benefit by dialogue and public participation.

But anyone who has ever sat in a courtroom to observe sentencing knows judges don't just toss people in jail willy-nilly. Unless the crime is outrageous or extremely violent, first-time offenders aren't locked up. There may be a fine, probation, restitution, community service or some combination.

And let's not forget society's greatest anti-crime commitment. That is, taxpayers, in some cases at great personal sacrifice, support a free public education system for every person through high school. We make this commitment to better our society and give young people opportunities to learn skills that will build stronger communities.

When people end up in prison, we invest in education there as well to help inmates who didn't take advantage of the aforementioned opportunity when it was presented to them. We also employ alcohol and other drug counselors to help inmates combat their addictions.

Many other programs are aimed at helping residents straighten out their lives. A more recent addition to the list is Drug Court, which Judge Lisa Stark helped spearhead in Eau Claire County. It offers those with drug problems help cleaning themselves up in exchange for a commitment from the participant to meet specific requirements.

Some blame the state's passage of truth-in-sentencing laws for pushing up the inmate population, and that may be a factor. But truth-in-sentencing didn't happen in a vacuum. It was the result of society being fed up with criminals being caught, convicted and put away for a fair amount of time as punishment, only to read where the criminals got early release to wreak havoc on society yet again... and again.

And then there are many cases of people who have drinking or drug problems, and continue to drive after being ordered not to. They're not dangerous the same way a killer or sexual predator is dangerous, but we know we don't want chronic drunken drivers out on the highways. And after three or more "second chances" we have to do something.

So, yes, let's keep looking for less expensive and potentially more effective ways to deal with lawbreakers than putting them behind bars.

At the same time, we don't want to be known as a high-crime state, and one of the ways to avoid that is to segregate the

most dangerous members of our society so they can't repeatedly prey on the rest of us. And sometimes prison is the only way to do that.