

## Residents asked to organize for justice (TIP) reform (4.5.06)

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Residents asked to organize for justice reform(

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Inequity in treatment, racial profiling and the savings, both financial and societal, of alternatives to incarceration were discussed with a small group who attended the Criminal Justice Reform presentation Monday night at the LCO Convention Center.

Both Native American and non-native residents of Sawyer County gathered to hear presentations from WISDOM, Inc., on the Treatment Instead of Prison campaign and from the Greater Minnesota Racial Justice Project.

WISDOM Inc., is a faith-based organization formed to address economic, racial and social disparities in regions throughout the state. It is an affiliate of the Gamaliel Foundation. According to its mission statement, the Gamaliel Foundation "intends to be a powerful network of grassroots, interfaith, interracial, multi-issue organizations working together to create a more just and more democratic society. The organizations of the Gamaliel Network are vehicles that allow ordinary people to effectively participate in the political, environmental, social and economic decisions affecting their lives. The network helps create and sustain such organizations and is the vehicle for these organizations to act on a national and international level."

The racial justice program is active in the central region of Minnesota in an area that includes portions of both the Red Lake and Leech Lake Ojibwe reservations.

Audry Thayer, who has many family ties to the Lac Courte Oreilles tribe and the St. Croix tribe to the west, is the project coordinator of the Greater Minnesota Racial Justice Project which is a branch of the American Civil Liberties Union.

The project is addressing racial profiling in several counties of Minnesota that include tribal lands. Trained "freedom fighters" act as monitors in the courtrooms to document all cases that go through the court systems. The monitors are a presence in the courtroom to remind judges, district attorneys and public defenders that their actions are being watched.

Court monitors make sure there is no inequality or different treatment within the courtroom. When different treatment of different races is documented, the ACLU steps in legally to file suit. The Minnesota project has also been active in educating native residents about their rights under the United States Constitution. Project members conduct training sessions on how to speak to a judge and on subjects rights at the time of an arrest or when stopped by an officer. Thayer said when dealing with law enforcement and politicians, "they want to see numbers."

The project has been gathering statistics in a six county area where the arrest rate is one in 25 Caucasian to Native American.

Local WISDOM consultant Steve Carlson said a similar situation exists in Sawyer County. Citing statistics that were submitted for the county's recent Drug Court grant, Carlson said while Native Americans account for only 16 percent of the county's population, 46 percent of all arrests are of Native people. "This is a gross disparity."

David Liners, the executive director of WISDOM, Inc., said this congregation-based group is about "bringing forces together for positive social change." Liners said "the state has lost its mind when it comes to prisons," adding that the absurd spending rate for prisons is the reason the state doesn't have money for schools and other programs.

WISDOM is trying to raise awareness around the state about how lopsided the system has become with more people being locked up for lesser and lesser crimes. "It's the wrong way to do business." Liners said it's not only morally wrong but incarceration is the wrong way to spend money. "Treatment is better than warehousing people in jail." WISDOM is spreading the word about TIP, treatment instead of prison, and challenging counties around the state to offer community based alternatives programs. Projects such as the new Drug Court are examples of alternative programs that many counties in this area are beginning to implement, but presenters said more needs to be done to save money and to save families and communities.

According to data collected by TIP, "the evidence is overwhelming that incarceration is the least effective and most costly strategy for reducing drug use and crime." In Wisconsin prisons, 2,900 residents in need of treatment were identified as low-level non-violent offenders who had a minimal criminal history. The average annual cost of keeping each in prison is

\$28,622. For just \$8,100 the state could provide treatment, case management, probation supervision and other supportive services for each of those offenders. Organizers of Criminal Justice Reform urged those present to organize. "Solutions need to come from the community," Liners said. TIP is about "restoring people to community, restoring people to place. You can't restore them in Waupun or Taycheedah."

Carlson suggested the formation of a Northwest Wisconsin Justice Project to begin monitoring court proceedings and to look at existing alternative programs to see if they are serving the community. "We need to start talking about it (criminal justice). If nothing is discussed, nothing will ever change." Carlson will continue to work with those who attended the meeting. Anyone who is interested in setting up a project to examine the existing criminal justice system and assess alternatives to incarceration is asked to contact Carlson at 635-6416 or botmrung@centurytel.net.

Information on TIP is available at [www.tipwis.org](http://www.tipwis.org). The complete Justice Strategies report Treatment Instead of Prison: A Roadmap for Sentencing and Correctional Reform in Wisconsin is available on line at [www.justicestrategies.net](http://www.justicestrategies.net).