

Group call for drug abuse rehab instead of jailing offenders (3.23.05)

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Groups call for drug abuse rehab instead of jailing offenders

By Anna Krejci, News-Chronicle

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Advocates for affording drug abuse treatment to nonviolent offenders as an alternative to sending them to prison pleaded their case during a news conference outside of the Brown County Courthouse on Wednesday. There are 22 organizations in Wisconsin that support the educational endeavor, Treatment Instead of Prison, that explores the benefits of using drug abuse rehabilitation instead of sending certain offenders to prison.

The idea has been discussed in the Wisconsin Senate. A bill called the Addicted Offenders Accountability and Public Safety Act was introduced in the 2004-2005 legislative session. Wisconsin Sen. Carol Roessler was a spokesperson for a group of legislators that backed the bill. Groups on board include the Racine County Taxpayers Alliance, Task Force on Money, Education and Prisons and the Green Bay faith-based justice advocacy group, JOSHUA (Justice Organization Sharing Hope and United for Action.)

At the news conference, a woman shared a personal drug-addiction struggle. Jayne Baumgart said 20 years ago she used illegal drugs. "Had I not had the opportunity to go to treatment, I believe I would have been headed for the correctional institution. I am now currently and have been for the last 20 years, a very productive member of society," she said. TIP advocates showcased jail and prison population data as compared to Hennepin, County Minnesota. Hennepin County has a similar crime rate as that of Brown County, said Barbara Shiffer, co-president of JOSHUA.

The 2000 data compared the number of jail, prison and parole or probation inmates that Brown County had in 2000 compared to Hennepin County's numbers. Hennepin County is home to Minneapolis. Their data, after considering different populations, showed that Hennepin County spends \$4.6 million per year less than Brown County on corrections. The chart presented indicated that Hennepin County had 6,244 inmates on probation or parole compared with the 2,260 convicts on probation or parole in Brown County. The numbers showed there were 544 less prison and jail inmates in Hennepin County than in Brown County.

Shiffer highlighted that in recent years Wisconsin is spending more on corrections than neighboring states. "By the year 2000...Wisconsin's criminal justice spending ranked highest among Midwest states. Wisconsin spends approximately \$500- \$800 million per year more than Iowa and Minnesota on incarceration and policing, after adjusting to population differences," she said.

"Even though the state ranks high, according to the TIP supporters" numbers, the money spent on criminal justice per capita in Brown County is less than the national and state average. The coalition reported that Brown County spends \$400 per capita on criminal justice, while the U.S. average is \$471 per capita and the Wisconsin average is \$488 per capita.

Crime rates for Brown County in 2000 were .17 violent and 2.7 property offenses per 100 people. The figures are less than the U.S. average of .51 violent and 3.62 property offenses per 100 people and lower than the Wisconsin average of .24 and 2.99 property offenses per 100 people.

Rev. Steve Hartman, vice president of JOSHUA, said 7 percent of state spending goes towards the Department of Corrections. He said the state spends \$28,000 to incarcerate one inmate each year, money that equals a year of college tuition. TIP supporters say it will save money and make safer communities. "In addition TIP would work toward lowering the rate of repeat offenders for these individuals whose crimes are related to substance abuse and addiction," Hartman said.

About 70 percent of the Wisconsin prison population has a drug or alcohol addiction, he said. Nicole Hull, representative of the Fox Valley-based ESTHER (Empowerment, Solidarity, Truth, Hope, Equality, Reform), said "TIP, Treatment Instead of Prison, it is highly accountable. It puts accountability on the individual and not just relying on the criminal justice system to take care of that," she said.

Individuals otherwise costing governments money in jail will be able to pay child support and taxes, she said. TIP supporters assert that treating nonviolent drug abusers outside of prison will help law enforcement focus on arresting violent criminals.