
The time is right for a drug court in Brown County (5.25.08)

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The time is right for a drug court in Brown County Press-Gazette Editorial

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It makes sense in terms of public policy ? breaking the hold of substance abuse, incarceration and recidivism. It makes sense when we ask local officials to manage tax dollars as efficiently as possible.

Brown County Executive Tom Hinz has asked a subcommittee of the county's public safety committee to discuss the formation of a drug court and set criteria for participation. The panel is comprised of area residents plus representatives from law enforcement, human services and the legal community.

A drug court would put qualified, nonviolent felony drug offenders into a supervised treatment program rather than sending them to jail or prison. They would have to comply with several requirements, including weekly drug tests, support group meetings, drug court meetings and they would have to show evidence they were taking steps to remain drug-free.

"We've always known we can't get all the drugs off the street," Hinz, a former Green Bay police detective and Brown County Sheriff, told the Green Bay Press-Gazette last week. "We need a prevention program. You can lock people up and they'll come out with the best of intentions. But the best of intentions can fall by the wayside."

Winnebago County has had its drug court for two years and reports that it has been worth the investment. None of those participants who have graduated from the program have returned to jail, claims Winnebago County Circuit Judge Scott Woldt.

According to Woldt, in Winnebago County the taxpayers' cost for assisting a drug court participant is about \$8,100 per year, compared with more than \$28,000 for incarceration.

This isn't turning a blind eye to the mistakes that have been made. But it's a realistic assessment that there has to be another way to deal with nonviolent offenders.

In setting up a drug court, we would encourage county officials to include measures that allow for regular assessment to make sure the court is meeting the goals for which it was established.

Hinz has good company in supporting a drug court. Brown County Circuit Judge Don Zuidmulder, a former district attorney, is also a believer.

"It's the right thing to do," Zuidmulder said this spring in urging formation of the specialty court.

We agree. It's time to do the right thing.