



## The Star-Ledger

### A better way for drug users

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Locking up drug users but making no attempt to rehabilitate them is a waste of money as well as lives. The New Jersey Commission to Review Criminal Sentencing is preparing a report that spells out a better way: Expand the use of court-supervised substance abuse treatment programs that get people off drugs and keep them out of jail.

The report, which will be released to the public later this month, cannot be implemented unless the Legislature does its part by providing adequate funding and authorizing a full range of treatment options, including outpatient treatment for carefully selected drug court candidates.

All counties have drug courts that sentence drug users to residential treatment. As long as those diverted to drug court stay in a rehab program, make progress and stay drug-free, they stay out of jail.

This worthwhile program must be expanded to serve more people and allow carefully selected candidates to go to outpatient therapy instead of residential treatment. That would allow more of those who have jobs to keep them, reducing the chances that unemployment problems might hamper their success.

So far, 4,300 adults have been referred to drug courts since 2002, when the program went statewide. Those numbers are small compared with the 8,000 inmates who are in state prison for possessing or selling drugs. The inmates are one-third of the prison population, with more like them on probation or parole.

Without some attempt to intervene in their lives, 60 percent will end up back in jail. The recidivism rate for drug court graduates is 10 percent, better results for only \$10,000 a year per person instead of the \$30,000 a year the public spends to keep each person behind bars.

Giving drug users a chance to change does not mean coddling criminals. In fact, the panel that drafted the recommendation to expand the drug courts included prosecutors and judges. They know how much crime could be prevented by breaking the cycle of drugs to jail and back again.

Retired Superior Court Judge Barnett Hoffman, chairman of the commission, was the driving force behind an inmate treatment program in the Middlesex County jail five years ago, a program that is still running -- and should be duplicated in every jail in the state.

Putting drug users behind bars to pass time and watch TV does not work. Treatment gives them -- and their communities -- a fighting chance.

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