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Expand drug rehab in lieu of prison

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So what if it was a done deal when a state panel found that drug treatment beats jail time in conquering addiction? That doesn't mean the results of the study announced last week are any less true or any less useful. Nor does it negate the need for New Jersey to edge away from the mindless incarceration of certain drug offenders toward more thoughtful and effective methods of rehabilitation — methods that have proved to reduce recidivism among drug addicts and can cut costs for a prison system caught in the cycle of housing the same inmates over and over again.

Of course, one might say the fix was in when New Jersey tapped retired Judge Barnett E. Hoffman to lead an examination of whether drug-treatment programs instead of prison are really as effective as some claim they are. That answer was sure to be yes. Hoffman did after all create the model for such programs, at least in these parts — the Adult Substance Abuse Program, or ASAP, which has operated at the Middlesex County jail since October 2001. Ever since, Hoffman has been a vocal advocate for the expansion of treatment options in lieu of prison. It is only natural then that he would pilot the commission with some preconceived notions in mind.

Conversely, Hoffman is uniquely positioned to know how such programs work, or to be more to the point, how well they can work, not only in freeing individuals from longtime drug addictions but in saving the state the expense of their care. That perspective is possible because the Middlesex County program has been such a bright spot, so successful it literally has changed lives.

Meantime, the state has been derelict in providing sufficient treatment for these people for years — even as it expends ever-larger sums on jailing them, about \$40,000 per inmate per year. By comparison it devotes a pittance toward efforts designed to keep ex-convicts from returning to jail. All the panel is suggesting is that the state begin to invest just a little more of its dollars in post-preventive care — drug-treatment programs that can break the back and forth between confinement and freedom.

The proof is in the statistics: On average more than 80 percent of the graduates in Middlesex County's program have avoided returning to jail, compared to 47 percent statewide.

Some more evidence to consider: 68 percent of the 4,390 people statewide who have enrolled in New Jersey's special program for first-time drug offenders have remained with the program since its inception in 1997.

Intervention clearly works, so let it be tried more often. The commission has recommended that lawmakers allow those with two or more drug convictions to be eligible for the drug court program. So long as reasonable standards are set for the severity of individual crimes, the proposal has merit. So does early discharge for those who make progress in treatment, assuming it's at the discretion not only of counselors but of judges who

deal regularly with drug offenders.

The report shouldn't collect dust, either. The Legislature owes the study the courtesy of a full review and final decision.

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