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## NJ commission pushes expanded drug treatment

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TRENTON, N.J. (AP) ... New Jersey should let more drug offenders avoid prison by expanding drug treatment programs, a special state commission recommended Friday.

The commission, which has been reviewing jail sentencing laws, determined New Jersey could reduce recidivism and corrections costs by expanding treatment in lieu of imprisonment.

The commission chairman, retired Judge Barnett E. Hoffman, who helped organize a drug treatment program in Middlesex County, said his experience showed most drug-dependent people want help.

"Unfortunately, there is a paucity of drug treatment programs in the country and in New Jersey," he said. "This problem is especially acute for the impoverished who lack the financial wherewithal to afford effective treatment."

New Jersey has had a special program since 1997 that helps certain drug offenders avoid jail. Since 2002, 4,390 people have enrolled, with 68 percent of them remaining in the program.

The commission wants the governor and lawmakers to allow people who have two or more convictions to be eligible for the drug court program. Such people are currently ineligible.

It also proposed early probation discharge for people who for two years make progress in their treatment and more discretion for judges in dealing with drug offenders.

The report was praised by Families Against Mandatory Minimums, a national nonprofit organization that advocates for sentencing reforms.

"Many additional nonviolent individuals, whose substance abuse is the primary contributing factor in the offense, are caught in the net of mandatory sentencing laws but could be held accountable for their actions through cost-effective and rigorous treatment and rehabilitation programs offered by drug courts," said Joseph Greer, director of FAMM's New Jersey chapter.

The commission Friday also reiterated its December 2005 proposal to reduce the size of drug free school zones to 200 feet from the present 1,000 feet.

A commission study found students were involved in only 2 percent of drug free school zone cases, and that the zones around schools, parks and housing projects cover virtually all of some cities, with 96 percent of offenders jailed for zone violations either black or Hispanic.

The Legislature hasn't taken action on that proposal.

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