



DRUG TREATMENT ALTERNATIVE TO PRISON PROGRAM (DTAP)

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DTAP IN THE NEWS

Drug offenders get treatment not prison

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By Bud Foster -

PIMA COUNTY, AZ (KOLD) - "Prison in eight years didn't do for me what drug treatment did for me in three months," says Jamie Crane, a recovering drug addict who is now attending college and working full time.

Crane was prosecuted seven times on various drug offenses but was finally able to get into treatment and ended the cycle of crime.

It's an example Pima County Attorney Barbara LaWall hopes to repeat thousands of times over. She worked for a year and a half to set up a program that gets repeat offenders into treatment rather than shipping them off to prison.

She announced Pima County is the only recipient of a \$1.1 million grant from the US Department of Justice which will allow 80 drug offenders a chance to be treated for drug addiction rather than punished.

It's called DTAP, an acronym for Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison.

For LaWall, the program was borne out of the frustration she experienced as a drug prosecutor. "It was a cycle of offenders who were arrested, prosecuted, convicted, incarcerated and eventually released," she says. "And then promptly became re-arrested, prosecuted and sent back to prison." LaWall says many of those drug offenders wanted to break the cycle but didn't have insurance or the means to pay for treatment for themselves.

"It's wasn't fair," she says of those who had to face court with an appointed public defender rather than going to treatment.

There are by some estimates, more than 8,000 inmates in Arizona who are incarcerated on drug offenses, many of them for simple possession.

LaWall said the violent drug offenders need to be locked up but there are many who need a chance to break the cycle, an opportunity they don't get in prison.

"The men and women who but for their substance abuse addiction would probably be leading productive and crime free lives," she says.

Even past adversaries applaud LaWall's tenacity in getting the money and bringing so many resources together like the superior court's, sheriff's office, treatment centers, career counselors and Public Defender's office.

"The stars must be aligned because it's not often I get to say something nice about the County Attorney's office," Hirsh jokes.

Hirsh and LaWall were frequently on opposite sides when she prosecuted drug cases and he was a famed defense attorney back in the 1970's.

Now he's the Pima County Public Defender who has praise for her efforts.

"I think this is a monumental step forward in the administration of criminal justice," he says. Whether the pilot program is deemed a success or not, will in some part, be up to the people chosen to participate.

There will be 20 the first year and 30 each the next two years.

"They will be screened so be sure they have no violent criminal history, they are not sex offenders," says Amelia Craig Cramer, the DTAP program director.

Saving taxpayer money is a big part of the program and the savings, if it works, will be in the millions of dollars.

Sending those 80 offenders to prison would cost \$1.6 million a year. A drug treatment facility will be much less.

Some will stay only 30 days, some up to 90 days, depending on needs. They will be carefully monitored after that.

If they repeatedly fail in treatment, then it will be prison time as a result.

An experiment like this one in Brooklyn, cut the recidivism rate from 60 percent down to 24 percent, which would be a big savings to the state prison system which is suffering budget problems.

But then again, saving money is one thing, insuring there's no threat to public safety is another.

"We will make sure they are not violent predators that might harm other individuals in the community," Cramer said. "But who are really drug addicts who but for their addiction would not be going through the criminal justice system."

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