

Smart on crime

Adding treatment capacity should help criminal justice system keep Texas from being top jailer.

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Substance abuse and addiction are glaring drivers of the criminal justice system. Of an estimated \$38 billion spent in the United States on criminal corrections in 1996, more than \$30 billion was spent incarcerating those with a history of substance abuse or those who committed crimes related to substance abuse.

For more than three decades, substance abuse treatment has been identified as critical to reducing this cost and preventing recidivism.

Texas has taken a giant step toward providing treatment to all in the state criminal justice system who need it. A major influx of new funding in the last legislative session, \$205 million for the biennium, will double the capacity of the system to treat inmates, probationers and parolees. This will return offenders to society with tools to remain substance-free as well as relieve the pressure to build more prisons.

Texas has more people in its correctional system than any of the three most populous states and is second only to Louisiana in its incarceration rate, according to a report by Tony Fabelo with the Justice Center of The Council of State Governments. This is primarily due to a high conviction rate, a low parole rate and a shortage of alternative sanctions for those on probation and parole.

With the additional alternatives offered by the new funding, judges will have a wider range of intermediate sanctions. In particular, the increased bed capacity for one probation program will mean that the parole system will be able to send those whose only violation is a failed drug test to treatment instead of back to prison.

This new funding should help Texas reverse the unfortunate trend toward high incarceration rates and more prisons.

As chair of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, state Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, was instrumental in securing this funding. He said Texas has done a good job of responding appropriately to those who have committed violent offenses such as rape, murder or childhood sexual abuse.

"But you can't just be tough on crime," Whitmire said. "You also have to be smart on crime, and this is the smart part."

It is smart to respond with treatment options for those who might not be in the criminal justice system were it not for their addiction or substance abuse. It changes lives and it saves money. That might be not only smart, but brilliant.

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