Tough Love

Force addicts to get treatment

Hollywood and politics are not strangers to each other, but often the glitterati line up behind the trendy side of an issue. That’s why it’s gratifying that popular movie and television actor Martin Sheen will be the honorary chairman of the campaign against Proposition 36, the drug decriminalization initiative.

Sheen knows something about dealing with drug addiction. A few years ago, when his son Charlie Sheen, an actor with substance abuse problems, left a court-mandated rehabilitation program, Martin Sheen called his son’s probation officer and turned him in. An arrest warrant was issued, and Charlie Sheen was forced back into treatment. The younger Sheen admitted later that his father “saved my life.”

Unlike the principal backer of Proposition 36, billionaire financier George Soros, Martin Sheen understands that leniency doesn’t work with drug addicts. A firm hand is a must.

Proposition 36 on the November ballot would do one good thing: Mandate an additional $120 million for addiction treatment in California. But it would also do one very bad thing: Ban nonviolent drug offenders from being sent to jail. That would erase the proposition’s benefits, and eviscerate drug court programs throughout the state.

Drug courts depend on swift sanctions for those who relapse, usually by sending them to jail for a few days. It works very well to focus addicts on the need for sobriety. Proposition 36 would make it illegal to send drug court participants to jail.

Voluntary drug treatment works well for some addicts, usually people for whom the threat of losing a job or a family is enough to convince them to get help. But for most hard-core addicts, and particularly the ones who will otherwise become criminals, mandatory treatment is necessary. It’s a myth that addicts must want treatment in order to get clean and sober. Several major studies have shown that mandatory treatment works as well as voluntary treatment.

That’s why drug courts and mandatory treatment are increasing, and why they show such good results. A study done in a Washington, D.C., drug court this year showed that defendants who faced sanctions for drug use were three times more likely to be drug-free than defendants who didn’t face sanctions. And, the drug court participants who faced sanctions were “significantly” less likely to be arrested over a one-year period than those who didn’t face sanctions.

Supporters of Proposition 36 apparently believe that, since the war on drugs has gone badly, we should surrender by releasing criminal addicts rather than changing tactics by increasing mandatory treatment. Drug-treatment professionals don’t support Proposition 36. They, like Martin Sheen in dealing with his son, understand that only tough love will work. The vicious cycle of addiction and crime can only be broken through forcing addicts to get the treatment they need.