In-Prison Drug Programs Should be Expanded

Treatment for Chronic Abusers Costs Less than Incarceration

By Barry R. McCaffrey

DRUG-DEPENDENT individuals are responsible for a disproportionately large percentage of violent crimes and property offenses, committing about half of all felonies in big U.S. cities. According to the National Institute of Justice’s Arrestee and Drug Abuse Monitoring report, roughly two-thirds of adults and more than half of juveniles arrested test positive for at least one illicit drug.

A third of state prisoners and about 1 in 5 federal inmates said they committed their offenses while under the influence of drugs. Many of them turned to crime for money to support expensive drug habits. Three-quarters of chronic cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine users are arrested in the course of any given year, and only a quarter of these people received drug treatment in the past. Most return to drugs as soon as they complete their prison terms. In turn, drug abusers constitute half the people on probation and parole in America.

Throughout the United States, 2 million arrested drug users a year require treatment to extricate themselves from lives of crime that keep them from being productive members of society.

Because so many drug addicts become involved with the criminal justice system -- and take up a significant portion of America’s law-enforcement and corrections budget -- prisons are a natural place to offer drug treatment. Studies prove that when people are forced into therapy, results are positive. Unfortunately, only a small proportion of inmates requesting drug treatment currently are helped. Without effective intervention, we are merely postponing the time when prisoners return to drugs and crime.

Research indicates that therapy lasting longer than 90 days is much more likely to reduce drug use and crime. Follow-up is also important. An evaluation conducted by Dr. James Inciardi, editor of American Drug Scene and author of many books on drugs and prisons, demonstrated that prisoners who participated in transitional work-release programs after drug treatment were twice as likely to remain drug-free and a third more likely to be arrest-free 18 months after release, compared to inmates who received no such supervision.

These findings need to be given careful attention at a time when probation and other intermediate measures are being eliminated. Drug treatment coupled with various forms of rehabilitation, such as literacy and job training, yields the best results.

Dr. Alan Leshner, director of the National Institute of Drug Abuse, has made extraordinary contributions to the scientific understanding of substance abuse as a brain disease. Although there is a sociological context for drug use, biological aspects of addiction must be corrected as well as behavioral dimensions of the problem. In other words, addicts need medical help getting off the drugs that have changed the chemistry of their brains.

Jeremy Travis, former director of the National Institute of Justice, argues for drug treatment as an aspect of “risk management.” Simply put, treatment reduces the risk that inmates will become repeat offenders.

The increase in spending for prisons has accelerated at a breakneck pace. From 1980 to 1996, the number of people in U.S. prisons tripled, largely due to drug and alcohol abuse. The cost to taxpayers of keeping a person in jail is about $25,000 a year. Treatment costs are very little by comparison. Experience has shown that we can’t arrest our way out of the drug problem.

Today, 700 drug courts have been instituted or are in the planning stages throughout the United States -- up from the dozen that existed in 1994. These courts offer drug treatment as an alternative to incarceration for non-violent offenders. Defendants who complete the drug-court program either have their charges dismissed or sentences reduced. More than 100,000 people have been diverted to drug courts, which save money and lives.

But drug courts and other diversionary programs for drug treatment currently reach only 3 percent of the criminal justice population. In the interest of public safety as well as humane and effective correctional policy, drug courts, drug-free prisons and drug treatment for lawbreakers should be expanded. Ultimately, such programs will reduce overall drug abuse in America.

Barry R. McCaffrey is the director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

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