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STEVE LOPEZ

Using tax dollars to turn lives around is money well-spent

It isn't cheap, but numerous studies suggest mental health courts cost no more than traditional courts and might prove to be cheaper over the long term, with much more to show for the investment.

Steve Lopez

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Judge Michael Tynan stepped down from the bench and congratulated five criminal defendants who had turned their lives around. His voice cracked as he told them how proud he was, and then he threw a party and passed out pieces of chocolate cake, with hugs all around.

In Orange County Superior Court, a beaming Judge Wendy Lindley congratulated felons on their successful reforms and then led the cheers, with spectators and court personnel joining in.

In Santa Clara County Superior Court, Judge Stephen Manley peered from his bench at 10 shackled inmates and said:

"The purpose of our program is very simple. We want to get you out of jail, and we want you to stay out."

Readers sometimes ask me whether, in addition to writing about government at its worst, I could give more examples of tax dollars put to good use.

Today I offer you Exhibit A.

I've been in a lot of courtrooms over the years, but I've never seen anything like the scenes that played out before judges Tynan, Lindley and Manley.

In each case, the defendants who stood before them were battling chronic mental illness. And in each case, the judges had long ago recognized the madness of locking people up, at great public cost, for being sick.

"We can't expect better outcomes without changing what we do," Lindley said.

The idea of mental health courts is starting to catch on around the country, and California now has several. Manley was among the nation's pioneers when he began his operation more than a decade ago. Like Tynan and Lindley, he had presided over traditional criminal courtrooms for years and was frustrated at the daily churn of repeat offenders.

"The role of a judge is not just to be fair and just, but to get better outcomes," Manley said. "I was sentencing people repeatedly for the same offenses and getting no different results."

Manley first ran a drug court, ordering defendants into treatment rather than sending them to jail or prison. But he realized he was addressing only part of the problem. So he now also runs a dual-diagnosis court for defendants who are both mentally ill and addicted to drugs or alcohol, a condition staggeringly prevalent among the homeless population and military veterans.

Churning such people through the criminal justice system without addressing the problems that got them into trouble is inhumane, ridiculously expensive and staggeringly ineffective.

So probation officers, lawyers, mental health workers and other judges pull defendants from the traditional criminal justice system and hand them over to Manley, Tynan or Lindley in these alternative courts.

Instead of being incarcerated for their offenses, defendants are provided with housing, mental health care and close monitoring. It isn't cheap, but numerous studies suggest mental health courts cost no more than traditional courts and might prove to be cheaper over the long term, with much more to show for the investment.

So it's a no-brainer, right? We can presume these operations will be fully funded, with more such courts on the horizon?

Yeah, sure.

All three judges say they are fighting to hold on to the funding they've got, thanks to state and county budget cuts. Tynan said his program is already heavily dependent on foundation grants, and even at that, he's got room for only 54 clients in a county that has roughly 2,000 mentally ill people in jail.

I'll admit that, four years into a journey with a friend who has opened my eyes to this country's shameful record on mental illness, I'm passionate about the subject. So before voters approve a raid on Mental Health Services Act funding on the May 19 ballot (Proposition 1A), and before the governor, legislators and county officials reduce funding for mental health courts, I'd like to tell you a little more about how they work.

In Manley and Lindley's case, their courtrooms are housed in buildings that have space for mental health workers, probation officers, veterans groups, etc. It's one-stop shopping. Lindley's courtroom is in the old Buffums Department Store at 10th and Main in Santa Ana, and another tenant there is a cop named Randy Beckx, one of Lindley's biggest allies.

"The fog was lifted for me," Beckx said about a revelation he had after arresting the same two street people repeatedly over the years. Both were mentally ill, but they never got any help in jail, until checkups revealed one had a brain tumor and the other had breast cancer. Beckx said he believes the vast majority of Santa Ana's homeless people have a mental illness, and his mission is to help them rather than lock them up.

For all their compassion, Lindley, Manley and Tynan can be tough, no-nonsense judges.

"Don't give me excuses; I want the truth," Lindley demanded of a defendant who had failed to show up for a substance abuse program she had ordered him to attend.

That kind of tough love pays off. Tynan sends offenders to a housing and treatment program called SSG in downtown Los Angeles. SSG says that at the one-year point, Tynan's defendants have an 84% decline in jail days, a 95% drop in homelessness and a 43% increase in employment or education.

I happened to be in Tynan's courtroom on party day -- five defendants were graduating after 18 months in treatment, with their drug possession charges dropped because they had completed the program.

"I could have retired from this job eight years ago," Tynan announced to his smiling grads. "But coming to work with people like you is more desirable than taking a break. . . . I'm

not sure that if I was forced to confront the challenges you have, I would have had the courage and character to do what you have done."

The five took turns thanking Tynan, SSG employees and Mark DeWitt, a passionate public defender who helped guide them into Tynan's court when he discovered they were failing in drug court because their mental illness was not being addressed.

"I just want to say I never would have made it this far without all of you, especially Mark," said a defendant named Latanya.

"I lost a lot of self-respect, and I'm starting to get some of that back," Linda said.

"This is a moment of success for me," Johnny said. "I don't think I've ever had a moment like this in my life."

steve.lopez@latimes.com

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