

Los Angeles Times

Sunday, March 15, 2009



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.

By Steve Lopez

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.

Judge Tynan also presides over Public Counsel's Homeless Court Program.