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## Fighting drugs

Drug courts in Vermont are a case of spending money to save money.

At present, money is scarce for expanding the use of drug courts. But experience in Rutland, Chittenden and Washington counties has shown that drug courts are a sound investment for taxpayers and for drug abusers who otherwise would end up in jail.

The judiciary established Rutland's drug court as a pilot project in 2004, and a recent study has shown the program's success in keeping offenders out of jail. Defendants who chose not to participate in the drug court program were six times more likely to be re-arrested over a 36-month period than people who completed the drug court program. Also, the recidivism rate for those graduating from Rutland's drug court program is 19 percent. The general statewide recidivism rate for fiscal year 2008 was 50 percent.

The purpose of drug court is to direct criminal defendants away from prison and toward the treatment needed to halt the drug abuse that led to their criminal behavior. "Jail simply does not work," said Karen Gennette, Vermont drug court coordinator. "People usually come out worse than they went in."

The favorable figures on recidivism probably reflect the reality that those participating in drug court programs are those who are ready, or readier, to find their way free of drugs. The hard-core cases who want no part of treatment are always going to be among those who re-offend. But reducing the jail population, and the population of drug abusers, to that smaller hard core is in everyone's interest.

Drug court works, according to those involved, because for defendants involved with drugs, avoiding jail is a significant incentive for sticking with their drug treatment programs. The treatment program has proven effective because it lasts for 14 to 16 months and because it involves significant individual attention. Thus, the program allows the state to avoid the costs of imprisonment and gives the offender the chance to set his or her life on the right track.

Drug court requires an extensive commitment of manpower, including case

worker, substance abuse specialist, treatment team coordinator and other officers of the court. These specialists cost money, but the study of the Rutland court found a return on investment of 150 percent over five years.

The success of drug courts in Vermont comes at a time when the nation is rethinking its attitude toward drug offenders. The past 30 years have been dominated by the so-called war on drugs and a punitive attitude toward criminals of all kinds.

Yet we have seen that society incurs serious self-inflicted damage by holding to that punitive view. We know that drugs are a contributing cause to many crimes; helping people get free of drugs is an effective way of cutting down on crime. We all benefit when offenders manage to kick their habits. Taxpayers avoid the cost of locking addicts up, and addicts become contributing participants in society.

Thus, an altruistic interest in the welfare of the offender is not the only motive for establishing drug courts. A commonsense interest in the good of society is also part of it. Money for an expanded drug court program is limited for the moment, but in the long run, the criminal justice system will do us all a favor by addressing abuse and addiction in a constructive rather than a punitive way.

Neither violent offenders nor dealers are eligible for drug court, nor should they be. But drug abuse in the nation remains a plague, not just on individuals and their families, but on taxpayers, neighborhoods, and our neighbors south of the border. It is America's appetite for drugs that has turned Mexico into a war zone. We have a responsibility to curb that appetite. Drug court is showing itself to be one of the best weapons of all in the war on drugs.

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