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# Guest column: Drug Court means less cost, lower recidivism

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Law-abiding citizens can feel secure when non-violent offenders are sent to Drug Court because the program is structured to provide intensive observation of participants through completion of their sentence.

Nationally, the scientific community has put Drug Court under its microscope and concluded it is more viable than incarceration, better than probation and

There has been an expansion of a successful program that offers benefits to many and conserves taxpayer dollars. Duval County Adult Drug Court added 200 spaces in the program for non-violent, adjudicated felons with continued substance abuse problems.

A quick look at some numbers should give you an idea of the savings: It costs at minimum \$20,000 annually to jail someone convicted of a drug charge. If that same person were alternatively sentenced to Drug Court for approximately \$2,000, that would save taxpayers \$18,000 annually - far less than incarceration.

Drug Court has the capacity to handle up to 200 drug offenders per year. You can do some simple math and see that this program can potentially save us millions of dollars.

Another very important benefit of Drug Court is realized by the offenders themselves. Those who are sentenced to this program are required to get substance abuse treatments to which they may otherwise never be exposed, hence increasing their ability to beat their addictions and return as productive citizens to the community.

Statistics show recidivism rates of non-incarcerated offenders are indeed lower, which means they are less likely to remain in the criminal justice system. This eases the burden on courts.

better than treatment alone.

While the research and data show that Drug Court is a fiscally responsible approach to fighting the expensive financial burden that drugs cause society, we also have a social responsibility to improve our community.

In the Public Defender's Office, we represent clients on a variety of charges, and the fact is that drugs are often at the root of crimes. Burglaries are committed to support drug habits, assaults are inspired by drug deals gone bad and prostitution often occurs for the sole purpose of funding a drug fix.

Here in Duval County, we are very fortunate to gain an expansion to our Drug Court.

Recent data shows tremendous success through single digit recidivism rates; a mere 6.9 percent of graduates with felony convictions became repeat offenders, and 7.4 percent of those with misdemeanors.

These numbers include participants from January 2005 to December 2007.

Balance that against the statewide recidivism rate of offenders released from prison, which is 32.8 percent. Also, data from drug screen results shows that repeated drug use is minimized.

The local Court Administration says 98 percent of Drug Court participants show negative results on subsequent tests while in the program.

I applaud Chief Judge Donald Moran for implementing Drug Court and my predecessors for utilizing it. I am fully committed to continue dedicating staff to manage the program.

Matt Shirk is Fourth Judicial Circuit public defender.

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