

My Turn: New Hampshire Health Protection Program promotes public safety

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New Hampshire is in the grips of a heroin epidemic. Our challenge now is how to fight back and win. During a crisis like this, it is the responsibility of members of the judiciary to comment on measures that can improve the administration of justice. I believe this is one such time.

Over the past several months, I have attended several forums to address the growing heroin epidemic that extends to every corner of our state. At the forums, community leaders from the Legislature, law enforcement, health care, treatment as well as concerned citizens all agreed, something must be done.

The shocking truth is that New Hampshire has the highest addiction rate in the nation and ranks second lowest in available treatment. Only Texas scores worse. The result? Without sufficient and adequate treatment, many individuals suffering from addiction end up on the streets, committing crimes to support their addiction. They recycle in and out of jail and prison at a great cost to society, compromising public safety and without any improvement in their condition. Indeed, nearly 70 percent of those offenders in jail or prison are suffering from a drug addiction, a mental illness or both, and when released, they continue to commit crimes because their addiction remains untreated.

If we think we can turn the tide on addiction by incarcerating addicts, we only have to look at history to see that as jail and prison populations increase, so have the devastating effects of addiction. Jail does not treat addiction, it cultivates it.

There is a path forward. The way to enhance public safety and to help prevent the perpetual cycle of addiction and crime is to reauthorize the New Hampshire Health Protection Program. It costs taxpayers up to \$34,000 per year to incarcerate an offender for one year, and only \$8,000 to treat and monitor them in the community. Those offenders who are treated in the community, on strict probation supervision, are significantly less likely to re-offend than those who are released from

jail or prison. But treatment needs to be available, and the New Hampshire Health Protection Program is a highly effective way for the state to obtain federal funds with minimum expense to taxpayers to increase the treatment options for offenders.

More than 40,000 New Hampshire residents, who were unable to obtain insurance coverage before the program was enacted, are now covered, and a large percent of those covered are involved in the criminal justice system. Offenders who cost taxpayers money in incarceration, emergency room use and law enforcement response are now able to obtain insurance to pay for treatment – treatment that is more likely to address the underlying causes of their criminal behavior and keep society safe.

Several courageous leaders in Strafford, Grafton and Rockingham counties have funded programs such as drug courts, which are designed to reduce crime and save taxpayers money. If the New Hampshire Health Protection Program is reauthorized so as to remain in place, those counties will see a reduction in the cost of drug courts because the participants will remain insured.

The New Hampshire Health Protection Program was enacted after a bipartisan effort to create a plan that worked for New Hampshire. We have a choice: We can build more jails and prisons to incarcerate the increasing number of heroin addicts and spend millions of dollars in the process, or we can support the re-authorization of the New Hampshire Health Protection Program.

That insurance program will continue our commitment to the taxpayers of this state, and demonstrate to them that the court system and the Legislature will spend their money wisely to assure the best public safety outcomes.

(Tina L. Nadeau is chief justice of the New Hampshire Superior Court.)

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