

Stop perpetuating terrible stigma and effectively deal with mental health and addiction

By Jory Lorien

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To the Editor:

In attending a meeting on Page County to address ideas to make our community healthier and creating a better quality of life, the leading problem talked about was mental health and those suffering from addiction problems, SUD, and the need for partnerships to help address this problem.

I have been looking into other places that address this issue and Portugal stands out as the leading plan by decriminalizing drugs and setting up a board that finds alternate solutions like rehabilitation services. Taking those suffering from this tragedy out of the court system and into medical and counseling facilities. Some states like Oregon, and others including Virginia, have begun to take the War On Drugs mentality out of the equation because it has failed in dealing with this serious problem despite the fear mongering of those in the justice system who say it won't work, not admitting that incarceration rarely does either.

<https://time.com/longform/portugal-drug-use-decriminalization/>

“The U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, a rate that has increased 500 percent over the last 40 years,” according to the Sentencing Project. Prisons are full of people serving time on drug-related convictions, yet most experts agree that prison sentences rarely deter drug use, especially among young people.

According to a 2018 report by the Cato Institute on “The Budgetary Effects of Ending Drug Prohibition”, federal, state, and local entities spent about \$48 billion in 2016 on drug prohibition. Decriminalization of all drugs can reduce government spending and generate tax revenue, freeing up resources to expand treatment services for substance use and mental health disorders and other community services.

<https://www.tpoftampa.com/latest-on-the-decriminalization-of-drugs/>

“Virginia lawmakers are also working to get the state to begin considering drug decriminalization, although they’re setting out at a slower pace than the other states. A joint resolution introduced last week by Del. Sally Hudson (D), HJ 530, would task the state Crime Commission with studying alternative approaches to drug enforcement, including decriminalization of the possession of substances.”

Language of the proposed resolution argues that “the War on Drugs has entailed overwhelming financial and societal costs, and the policy behind it does not reflect a modern understanding of substance use disorder as a disease or substance abuse as a public health problem.”

“Traditional legal interventions, including arrest and incarceration, have proven ineffective in treating addiction and promoting public health,” it continues, “requiring new approaches that emphasize treatment and rehabilitation over arrest and punishment.”

<https://www.marijuanamoment.net/new-york-virginia-and-other-states-consider-new-drug-decriminalization-bills/>

I know there are families that have lost loved ones to this tragedy and wish those who gave it to them were locked away forever, but they have families too and incarceration does not solve the problem. Medical help in rehab and counseling have a far better chance in this community than incarceration that just perpetuates more tragedy for our community. Children without parents, grandparents raising them, wives without financial support, parents without the love of their sons and daughters, no momma around, etc., etc.

And those who sell in their neighborhood in small amounts are treated in the war on drugs mentality as the scum of the earth, excluded in programs that can help and given large amounts of time in prisons. They are not doing it for profit ,but to get that next high that their body so craves above any moral compass that might be left in them and without viable affordable rehab available.

Look at just the last six months of indictments in this county — 80 percent drug related, and just this month 29 indictments with 27 drug related. A lot of it due to recidivism, a sure sign of failed incarceration procedures.

Judges, jury, police officers, commonwealth, etc....if you don’t seek another solution besides this constant incarceration and down-right, strong-arm arrests of those with addiction problems, you are guilty of creating a greater harm on this community that has been proven as a model of failure. We have made small steps in a drug court and have an awesome public defender legal team headed by Tim Coyne to find alternate solutions, but the net must be cast wider.

Contact your legislature to support decriminalizing drugs and creating a model like Portugal did and other states are doing. Get involved and partner with any groups that can better facilitate mental health issues across this community. Stop perpetuating the terrible stigma for those suffering from addictions and especially the tragedy imposed upon their loved ones by constantly making them criminals instead of real people needing serious medical, rehab and counseling services.

We can do better!