

Approach to drug addiction isn't working

John Pickerill

November 27, 2016

Drug abuse in our community and in Indiana is worse than ever. Some media are now calling it an epidemic. Hospitals and our emergency responders are being overwhelmed with overdoses. Kids are being neglected, many having to be permanently removed from their parents who become addicted.

We've been fighting the drug problem with the same approach for almost 50 years now, by trying to prohibit access to addictive drugs and to deter abuse by locking people up who get caught with drugs.

So the question to ask is: After 50 years using this approach, is it working? Has it slowed down abuse? No.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, Indiana has one of the fastest growing overdose death rates in the country. This approach is not working. And it is because it tries to treat drug addiction as a criminal problem instead of a medical problem.

Crawfordsville Mayor Todd Barton stated it best, "Stopping the cycle of drugs starts with helping the people who are addicted to drugs, (because) where there is a market, there will always be a supply."

Drug prohibition is not solving the problem it was meant to solve. And it actually makes the problem worse in several ways.

First, our county jails and state prisons are overcrowded, a big reason being incarcerating non-violent drug offenders. According to the Indiana Department of Corrections 2015 annual report, 24 percent of the inmates are there only because of a controlled substance violation. They didn't rob anyone or physically harm anyone else. County jail populations are likely similar. They didn't commit any sort of violent crime or property crime. They're there only because of drug prohibition.

And the cost is tremendous. For 2015, the Indiana Department of Corrections reported taxpayers pay \$51 per day for every Indiana prisoner and there are 26,000 prison inmates. County jails pay

about \$35 per day for every jail inmate. With the money that could be saved, we could focus on actually reducing the drug problem. Jail is not the proper place to treat drug addiction. Substance abuse treatment facilities and recovery programs are.

Second, our law enforcement resources are stretched thin trying to enforce more and more drug prohibition laws. County courts and probation case loads are being overwhelmed. This leaves fewer resources available to protect against violent crime and property crime.

Third, drug prohibition creates organized crime that is able to finance itself with black market trafficking of illegal drugs.

Fourth, the harder we try to enforce drug prohibition, the more addicts turn to more dangerous drugs (meth being just one example) leading to more overdose deaths.

If any of this sounds familiar, it should. These are all the same problems that suddenly appeared with alcohol during Prohibition in 1920. Research by Cato Institute shows Prohibition didn't slow alcohol consumption much, but it increased the cost of law enforcement dramatically, increased violent crime, organized crime became rampant (i.e., Al Capone), and more dangerous forms of alcohol appeared causing significantly more deaths.

When Prohibition was repealed in 1933, these problems reversed themselves. Crime fell. Associated organized crime disappeared. Government spending decreased and its tax revenues increased. New voluntary efforts, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (created in 1934), succeeded in helping alcoholics.

It is a similar story in Colorado and Washington State when marijuana was legalized in 2014. According to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, homicides, sexual assaults, burglaries and robberies all decreased. According to the Drug Policy Alliance, Washington State also saw a decrease in violent crime and noted no increase in youth marijuana use or traffic fatalities. At the same time Washington has collected \$83 million in marijuana tax revenues, which they use to fund substance abuse prevention and treatment programs, youth and adult drug education, and community health care services.

As Indiana searches for the right approach to fighting drug addiction, could it be that it's right under our nose? Looking at what's worked historically and what's working now in other states, repealing drug prohibition would be a big step in the right direction to saving Hoosier communities. The last 50 years has shown us the drug prohibition approach hasn't worked. Let's try the approach that experience tells us will.