

## Drug courts: Why spending more will cost us less

Written by Mike Honda

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I want to bring attention to an Op-Ed I co-authored with actor and director Martin Sheen on the importance of criminal justice reform and the need to embrace methods that work:

As our country's fiscal crisis forces budget cuts across the board, we are witnessing a renewed interest in criminal justice reform and taking a closer look at the \$70 billion spent annually on America's correctional system. State and national leaders are calling for immediate spending reductions and an end to America's costly overreliance on incarceration.

Calls for reform intensified recently with the Supreme Court's ruling on the removal of thousands of inmates from California prisons and with this month's 40th anniversary of the War on Drugs.

While there are no quick-fixes, there are proven programs that we must expand during this reform effort. One highly successful program is the drug courts--a solution that saves money, cuts crime and serves veterans in need. There are now more than 2,500 drug courts in the United States, including 78 veterans treatment courts. California is home to 226 drug courts and leads the nation with eight veteran-specific programs. Here are four reasons why these courts must be at the center of any criminal justice reform process.

First, and most importantly, drug courts are the nation's most effective strategy in reducing recidivism--especially among drug-addicted, nonviolent offenders with long criminal histories. By closely supervising participants and keeping them in treatment long enough to transform into productive members of their community, drug courts significantly reduce the use of jails and prisons, improve employment and family functioning and save money by reducing crime, health care utilization and victim compensation.

A recent study of nine California drug courts found that for every dollar invested, up to \$16.10 is saved as a result of reduced recidivism. The courts, furthermore, reunite broken families, intervene with juveniles on the brink of a debilitating life of addiction and crime and stop repeat

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drunken drivers.

Second, the data backing up the drug courts is no longer up for debate. The rapid growth of drug courts over the last two decades has inspired researchers to pay attention. More research has been published on the effects of drug courts than virtually all other criminal justice programs combined. The facts are now known: drug courts reduce crime by up to 50 percent and have been found to save up to \$13,000 for every individual they serve. We also now know that 75 percent of those who complete drug court are never arrested again, an impressive track record for the courts.

Third, drug courts stepped up to serve the growing number of veterans in the courts who face charges stemming from substance abuse to mental health issues. By connecting our veterans to the benefits and treatment they earned through military service, drug courts and veterans treatment courts ensure that veterans do not fall through the cracks when they become involved with our criminal justice system. It also provides a critical stop-gap to prevent future veteran homelessness.

Fourth, drug courts are being successfully rolled out across the country. In our home state of California, for example, drug courts are courageously combating the scourge of methamphetamine and prescription drug abuse. This same success is being replicated across the country, from rural towns to our largest cities. Drug courts now number more than 2,400 and are located in every state. They represent truly nonpartisan drug policy.

In sum, drug courts focus on high-value offenders, those who have the highest need for treatment and wrap-around services, and those who have the highest risk of failing out of those services without support and structure. These are the individuals who drain the system of resources and perpetuate generational crime and substance abuse. Drug courts serve more than 120,000 such individuals every year, but this is only 10 percent of the eligible offender population. The Department of Justice recently identified 1.2 million individuals in the criminal justice system who would be eligible for drug court but are unable to gain access because one is simply not available.

This is precisely the reason why we need more drug courts, not fewer.

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As Congress looks to cut spending and reduce the federal deficit, it is critical that we do so judiciously and with an eye to the future. We must not make cuts to programs that will cost us more in the long run, particularly at the expense of our public safety. There is no greater example of such a program than drug courts.

If this nation is serious about lowering exorbitant criminal justice costs, then we should not cut a program that returns up to \$27 for every \$1 invested and which has the support of both Democrats and Republicans. We should, instead, hold the line on drug court funding so they can continue to treat our most seriously addicted offenders each year and meet the growing needs of our veterans in the criminal justice system.