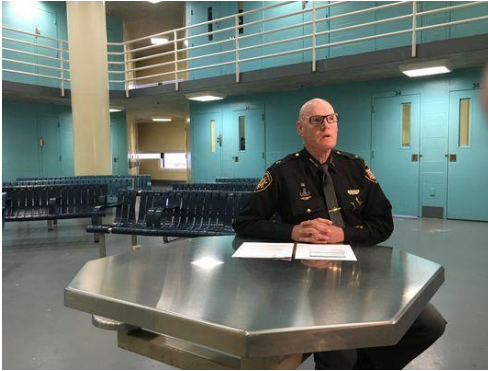


At the jail, time we tried something that may work

David Beran, Opinion contributor Published 11:24 a.m. ET Feb. 26, 2018



(Photo: Scott Wartman/The Enquirer)

Two articles in the Feb. 15 Enquirer, one from a judge and one from the sheriff imploring the need for more jail beds. Have we learned nothing in the last 40 years? Across the country, jails are largely for the poor and people of color. Everyone wants violent and dangerous offenders incarcerated. However, a high percentage of inmates are addicted, drug-dependent or have mental issues. Jails only exacerbate their problems.

As nice as it sounds that our local jail "facilitates treatment for hundreds of addicted inmates each year," let's be serious. Jail and rehabilitation are not compatible. Jails are a revolving door whereby most who enter remain stuck in the system.

Some local history is important. The Justice Center was to be complemented by a 400-bed minimum security facility. Heavy pressure was exerted to increase the capacity to 1,000, then 1,200 and finally 1,500 beds until the county commissioners balked at spending such high costs.

Meanwhile, The Enquirer editorial board pushed for county commissioners to have the Correctional Corporation of America (CCA) renovate the vacant Kruse Hardware, which it owned, as a minimum-security facility. The problem was the CCA was in the corrections business and not in the building renovation or construction business. CCA knew nothing of Cincinnati's stringent building code resulting in costs to the county approximately four times what CCA had estimated.

The county has spent way too much money on jails and jail lawsuits and not enough on a plan which would help individuals in need. Knowing jails don't work for a majority of inmates, why not try something that is well reasoned and might work?

We have two highly acclaimed criminal justice programs at the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University. We have an outstanding Cincinnati Police Department committed to problem-solving policing. The local Court Clinic is recognized throughout the country. Two agencies, Volunteers of America and Talbert House have years of experience providing services in alternative settings to jails. Prospect House has been providing residential addiction services locally for decades. Cincinnati has some of the finest psychiatrists and mental health treatment specialists in the country.

Hamilton County commissioners should form a blue ribbon committee to hold public hearings from the multiple experts in our local community. These professionals could tell us what is needed in the way of diagnosis, treatment and services that would 1) cost less than jail beds, 2) provide hope for those lost in the system and 3) effectively utilize taxpayers resources.

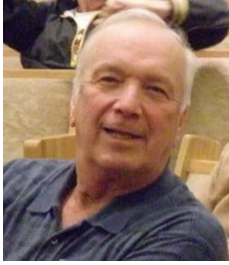
I served as staff for two criminal justice task forces: the Powell and West commissions. All the hearings were private and never widely publicized. Many good ideas were proposed, but these are gathering dust in some closet in the

County Administration Building. Public hearings as in a democracy would inform the public and let the citizens know of a commitment to find solutions.

We know local government officials often want quick fixes – more jails – and never have to answer for the long-term negative effects on individuals or the community. We also know governments often shy away from problems, i.e Congress can't pass gun background checks when 95 percent of Americans favor them. We also know it was Mothers Against Drunk Driving, not the government, that did something about the DUI issue.

Why not take a page from our local friend, Mr. Rumpke, who decided we can do more than build a landfill, we can recycle? And Rumpke now has the largest residential recycling center in North America located on Vine Street in St. Bernard.

We too can recycle and reclaim lives rather than relegating folks to our local correctional dumping grounds – the county jail. Let the local professionals of human behavior in our community with their wealth of knowledge and expertise be heard. It's time we tried something that may work.



David Beran, of Springfield Township, Cincinnati, is a Presbyterian minister and former Hamilton County assistant administrator/corrections who had major responsibility for the program and design of the Hamilton County Justice Center.