

Iowa Justice Action Network Alternatives to Incarceration

A number of policy decisions made over the past 50 years by the State of Iowa and the federal government have resulted in extremely high rates of incarceration. People of color and those living in poverty have been imprisoned at disproportionately high levels. Persons with treatable mental health problems and addictions also crowd our prisons. Diagnostic and treatment programs have advanced rapidly and can be used to provide better public safety through reduced recidivism.

Criminal behavior occurs in communities and is related to community problems. Community based treatment programs help strengthen communities, keep families intact and encourage problem solving in the real world, the one to which the offender will likely return.

It costs about \$34,025 per year to house prisoners in Iowa. Incarceration is often not helpful in making positive change. Many of the alternatives to incarceration listed below cost far less but require adequate funding from the legislature:

- Science based diagnostic assessment services to provide individualized recommendations to judges and other decision makers about preferred placement and treatment.
- Local drug courts and substance abuse treatment programs
- Local mental health courts, mental health crisis services, and treatment programs
- Adequately funded probation and parole services with individualized levels of support and supervision
- Community based programs that support employment, housing, education and training and other resources for successful reentry.
- Support for the children of incarcerated parents, so that multigenerational involvement with the system does not occur.
- Electronic monitoring
- Restorative justice programs

Many of these services already exist but have been inadequately funded or have relied on non-renewable grants. For example, cuts that have been made to the Adult Correctional Services budget in recent years have forced them to increase caseloads and end specialized programs for particular populations, such as the dual diagnosis program for mentally ill/addicted offenders that had previously won national recognition. **These cuts need to be restored.** In addition, separate funding should be provided to address accumulating facility repair and renovation needs.

We also recommend state funding for supportive services for the families and children of those who are incarcerated. Having an incarcerated parent is a major stressor for children, and they often experience problems in school. There are currently many volunteer support programs that could benefit from modest state grants to support their activities.

Every dollar invested in these services saves several dollars in incarceration costs and enhances community safety by reducing recidivism.