

VOICES

A FORUM FOR COMMUNITY ISSUES



Essay

Help, Don't Incarcerate, Addicts

By **GRETCHEN B. BERGMAN**

Seeing all the recent media attention to drug addiction and the overcrowding of our prison system offers me some hope about what can be done as an alternative to the cruel and unsuccessful methods and responses to drug addiction in the past. Kicking troubled teenagers out of school and locking up nonviolent drug offenders has been our society's way of avoiding the problem, while consequently undereducating those kids and creating a revolving-door prison system.

I am the mother of a



28-year-old heroin addict. He started using drugs when he was 13, and although there were a few attempts to intervene, he wasn't ready or able to accept the reality of his disease. Along the way, he gave up everything he loved—surfing, tennis and the dream of being a sports announcer—all for his drugs. A bright student, he was kicked out of high school when he was caught with marijuana. For the past seven years, he has been a part of the criminal justice system—all drug-related, nonviolent offenses. I have watched him nearly die of an overdose, only to go right back to the streets to use again.

He is now at Donovan State Prison. At the time he was arrested, I was relieved. He was using heroin in a suicidal way and had stopped trying to live. I was glad the phone call came from jail and not from the morgue. But unfortunately, prison doesn't stop drug use. There are plenty of drugs available behind bars; furthermore, punitive incarceration does nothing toward rehabilitation. For months, prisoners sit in cells ("human storage" is what my son calls it). By the time inmates are released, they are much further from recovery. Now they are not merely addicts, they are ex-convicts as well.

Without help, it is almost a guarantee that they will be re-

turning to prison.

We need to seek better ways to treat the illness of addiction. Studies show that the crimes of 85% of all inmates in California prisons are drug- or alcohol-related. The simplest, most logical and direct approach is to take the money that is spent on incarceration and direct it instead into mandated drug and alcohol treatment and rehabilitation.

Treatment works. Statistics show that addicts who are forced into treatment reduce their drug use and dependency, their criminal behavior and therefore their rate of relapse and return to prison.

We are losing the "war on drugs," which is based primarily on attempting to interdict and reduce the supply. Currently, we are witnessing a sea change of thinking, realizing that the only truly effective way of winning that war is to reduce the demand. A few in-prison programs are slowly appearing to assess and divert first-time addict offenders into effective treatment programs. However, to quote San Diego Superior Court Judge Robert Coats: "These are gestures, and we need a commitment to expand the gestures to deal with the scale of the problem."

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