

Drug treatment a team effort

By **JANE VELEZ**

First published: Thursday, April 9, 2009

New York is about to reform the Rockefeller Drug Laws, and the new state budget provides millions in funds for treatment programs.

My organization has 40 years experience working with substance abusers. We've been around longer than the 36-year-old drug laws. We've seen thousands of individuals enter treatment after a drug arrest and conviction, and thousands of lives have been turned around.

We know that treatment works. It's a more rational and cost-effective response to criminal drug offenses than mandatory incarceration.

But we're cautious. Along with public officials and reform advocates, we are highly invested in ensuring that reform succeeds. It must be very carefully implemented to allay concerns about community safety and the public's perceptions of substance abusers.

The professional treatment community in New York understands that not everyone arrested for a drug-related crime is a user, so not everyone should be referred to treatment. Judges, prosecutors and the defense bar need to work with the treatment community to assess individual cases and ensure that placement fits the need:

Not all addicts abuse the same substance, nor do they share the same history. Assessing the level of addiction and referring individuals to the appropriate level of care are complicated components of any reform measure, but they're critical.

Commitment to treatment and motivation are vital to recovery. Treatment providers have relied on a variety of incentives, supports and sanctions that encouraged individuals to remain in treatment. Because a repeal of the drug laws will redefine some strategies, measures must be adopted to incentivize clients to participate fully in their treatment.

Finally, all treatment options are not equal. The only way to assure quality control is to use treatment providers licensed by the New York State Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services.

Rockefeller Drug Law reform will increase demand for treatment significantly. To make sure an expansion of services is effectively managed, we need to foster collaboration between treatment providers and the criminal justice system, including the defense bar. A collective effort will finally open the door to treatment for substance abuse, benefiting not just individuals but whole communities.

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