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Mental Health Court worth the investment

New Hampshire recently got a resounding “F” from the U.S. Department of Justice for its treatment of mental health patients. But there is one area of mental health in which New Hampshire provides a model for the nation to follow – the Mental Health Court, which began as an experiment in Nashua in 2006.

Nonviolent offenders arrested for misdemeanor crimes can avoid court and jail time and instead enter a court-supervised therapy program. Once the team of doctors, social workers and other professionals determines that an offender qualifies, he or she is required to stay out of further trouble and maintain a set schedule of counseling and rehabilitation.

People with previous criminal records or more serious offenses, start with a guilty plea and a deferred sentence, pending successful completion of the program.

The Mental Health Court has diverted many would-be inmates from costly incarceration in the county jail, improving their chances of recovery and reducing the likelihood of recidivism. These are not hardened career criminals or violent offenders. They are for the most part people whose struggle with mental illness has put them afoul of the law.

As reported in Monday’s Telegraph, the average daily population at the Hillsborough County Department of Corrections is down about 60 people – and dropping still – from what was projected at the start of the fiscal year.

Jail Superintendent James O’Mara gives much of the credit to the Mental Health Court. In the past year, the program has expanded to cover all five of Hillsborough County’s district courts and is now operating in Merrimack, Milford, Manchester and Goffstown thanks to a \$200,000, two-year grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance.

But the grant is set to expire soon and officials are asking for \$100,000 from the state to fund the program in Hillsborough County for another year. At a time when the state Legislature is cutting, not adding programs, there is a real danger this request will be denied.

That would be, pardon the cliche, penny-wise and pound foolish. The state has already been criticized for spending more money to put people in institutions, rather than using less costly and more effective community placements. It makes

no sense to save \$100,000 in mental health services, only to spend more on incarceration.

Susan Stearns, director of development at the Greater Nashua Mental Health Center, estimates that the program saved more than 12,000 days in jail, an average of 33 beds a day, by diverting 235 people out of the jail and into treatment programs last year, at a savings of about \$60,000.

“What it comes down to is it’s more fiscally responsible. It costs more to keep people in jail. It would be fiscally irresponsible to not fund it. It will cost more money.” O’Mara said. In March, the county jail population dipped to 537, low enough that O’Mara could soon close a portion of the jail, resulting in even more savings.

Mental Health Court doesn’t just save money. Like community placement, it is a more effective and responsible way of dealing with people suffering from mental illness. This is one investment that will yield a high return for Hillsborough County and its taxpayers for years to come.

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