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Judge lends outlook on mental health to NH law enforcement

By JOSEPH G. COTE Staff Writer

John Broderick, chief justice of the New Hampshire Supreme Court, knows what mental illness can do to a person and to the people who love them. He, his wife, and his son walked through the "valley of mental illness" together. Broderick was seriously injured when his mentally ill son attacked him in 2002 with a guitar.

Still, Broderick and his wife were outside the New Hampshire State Prison three years later when their son, John Christian Broderick, was released.

Since the attack, the elder Broderick has taken a closer interest, and leadership role, in some of the statewide efforts to address how to better manage the intersection of the mental health and criminal justice systems. Efforts like the Community Connections Mental Health Court Project in Nashua.

The mental health court is a program that allows people who suffer from mental illness to avoid jail time, and sometimes a criminal record, if their illness directly leads to their infractions. In return, defendants are required to stay out of further trouble and stick to a counseling and rehabilitation program.

"Mental health is a huge issue. It's still deemed shameful by a lot of people. If it remains in the shadows, it will never get attention," he said.

Broderick is the chairman of the Interbranch Criminal and Juvenile Justice Council. Less than a year ago, the council agreed to focus its efforts on two things, sentence reform and the capabilities of the state prison system to administer mental health services.

Broderick said he is hopeful a task force will form by fall to examine mental illness among the state's prison population.

An alarming number of prisoners have a diagnosable mental illness or substance abuse problem. It is not surprising, he said, that since there is little treatment in the state's prisons and jails, many of those people commit new crimes.

The hope is that task force and the Chief Justice's Task Force on Mental Illness will find the best ways to treat mentally ill inmates and reduce recidivism.

"It's not a soft-on-crime effort. It's intended to be a smart-on-crime effort," Broderick said. "The goal is not to give them a slap on the wrist. The goal is to get them well."

Broderick said it is important to identify mentally healthy people who choose a life of crime

compared to "good people with a bad illness" and sentence or treat them accordingly.

"I think that we need to be sober enough to understand those differences. You have to sift more finely," he said. "We might find over time we're driving down the rate of crime and the cost to deal with it."

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