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Lefferts and Cramer: Jail alternatives can benefit all

By Lori Lefferts and Amelia Craig Cramer Special to the Arizona Daily Star

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Courtesy Pima County

The relationship between criminal defense and prosecutors is by definition adversarial. Although we battle each other in court, outside the courtroom there is much upon which we agree, and we often work together on projects to improve the criminal justice system. One of these projects is the innovative Safety + Justice Challenge, which is designed to reduce our local jail population without risking public safety.

Real collaboration is tough work, and we are proud of our progress to date. The Safety + Justice Challenge's community collaborative process brings a wide array of partners to the table, and enhances interactions among the various criminal-justice agencies and members of the community at large. It includes formerly incarcerated persons and their families, substance abuse and mental health treatment providers, and others.

There is no such thing as a perfect justice system, but Pima County's is better than most. Our criminal-justice system is how we hold individuals accountable for breaking the law and for harming victims. When violent offenses are committed, we agree that incarceration is appropriate and necessary to protect the public safety. But, incarceration is not necessary for many crimes.

Many individuals who are poor and suffer from addiction and mental illness become involved in the criminal-justice system for crimes that are not violent or dangerous, and they do not pose a threat to public safety. But they have mental health or substance abuse problems that can be addressed with therapeutic interventions. Treatment for substance abuse and mental illness often can provide better results in preventing future criminal activity than incarceration. Therapeutic interventions not only reduce recidivism, they also save lives. And they save money at the same time, because treatment costs significantly less than incarceration.

Working together on the Safety + Justice Challenge is nothing new for the County Attorney's Office and Public Defense Services. We have worked together for years. Together our agencies collaborated on the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, which decreased the juvenile detention population by 90 percent while simultaneously reducing delinquent behavior. Together we implemented the County Attorney's Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison program. This unique program, the only one of its kind in Arizona, provides treatment and rehabilitation, instead of prison, for substance addicted defendants.

These experiences working together have strengthened our relationship and engendered trust between us. We have made major strides in the right direction. Yet, there is still more to do to improve the criminal-justice system in Pima County. We need more therapeutic options for people convicted of nonviolent, non-dangerous offenses. We need more resources for treatment alternatives, and more funding to enable us to continue and to expand the Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison program and to develop intervention programs for low-level offenders, many of whom are homeless, drug addicted or mentally ill.

In 2018, we look forward to inquiring further into the issue of racial and ethnic disparities in our criminal-justice system, and seeking solutions for eliminating those disparities. We all want a criminal-justice system that is fair and equitable, one that offers alternatives to jail when doing so does not jeopardize public safety. These are complicated and important discussions for our justice system leaders and community stakeholders, and the relationships we've developed will help us find and implement solutions that work.