

“As I See It”

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Short and Long Terms Solutions to Overcrowding at the WCHC
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As late as Tuesday, August 16, 2005 the Worcester County Jail and House of Correction (WCHC) held more than 1400 prisoners in a prison built for 822 prisoners.

The history of the WCHC is that after new buildings are erected, they are filled to overflowing levels, resulting in the same overcrowding that existed before. Transferring prisoners to other prisons in the state is no solution because those facilities too are overcrowded. Reduction of prison sentences, where appropriate, is the best solution to reduce unsafe overcrowding at the WCHC. We need support programs to better prepare prisoners for release, and that will cut down on the rate of recidivism.

As most of the county prisoners were convicted for lesser offenses than those in state prisons, there should be fewer objections to decreasing the sentences at WCHC than there would be to reducing the sentences of those in state prisons. This one change will make the WCHC a safer place for both guards and inmates.

What does it matter if an 18-month sentence is reduced to 12 months? In the end, the prisoner still does time for a committed offense. It costs over \$30,000 a year to incarcerate a prisoner. If the sentence is reduced in the example given from 18 months to 12 months, \$15,000 would be saved and that money could be used for treatment programs that are far less expensive than imprisonment.

Suspended sentences with probation should be the preferred sentence, to be chosen generally, unless the circumstances call for greater severity. Alternatives to incarceration should always be the preferred form of the penalty, unless the circumstances plainly call for a prison sentence. Probation is preferable to imprisonment for many reasons. Probation maximizes the liberty of the individual while at the same time vindicating the authority of the law and protecting the public from further violations of law. Imprisonment should always be a last resort.

Many prisoners now at the WCHC could be placed on probation. Fines or restitution could be used in some cases as an alternative to incarceration. Some prisoners at the Worcester County Jail and House of Correction are there due to an inability to pay fines. Often times, fines could be reduced or remitted when an individual can establish an inability to pay. Area Judges should consider the population of the Jail and House of Correction when setting bail or sentencing inmates. Prisoners should also be able to pay their debt to society by providing community service. This is a win-win situation. Electronic monitoring should be utilized more as an alternative to jailing.

We need intensive probation, day reporting, victim compensation, and house arrest in the final six months of a sentence for certain prisoners, drug treatment, halfway houses, and fines for less serious and first time offenders as alternatives, wherever appropriate, to jailing. Pre-trial detainees must be moved faster through the system. High bail that leads to incarceration while awaiting trial should be reduced if possible. Bail reduction might reduce the prison population as many might be able to pay and leave.

Most prisoners at the WCHC are pre-trial detainees who have not been convicted but are serving time awaiting trial. Perhaps the District Attorney, lawyers for prisoners, and judges working together could help speed up the process. Recently the Worcester County Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts received a letter from a person who said that he was held for more than two years before being brought to trial. He was then found not guilty. Hiring of more Bar Advocates and Public Defenders may help resolve this problem so that justice for all may be obtained.

Reduction of incarceration should free funds to support the eight regional re-entry centers that started last year. These provide employment advice, job training, mental health services, substance abuse treatment and housing services which should ultimately reduce the number of individuals carried off to jail.