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ICYMI: Klein Highlights Columbus' Innovative Program to Help Nonviolent Offenders in Washington Post Op-ed

COLUMBUS – On Friday, the Washington Post published an op-ed penned by Columbus City Attorney Zach Klein on his office's work to improve the criminal justice system. In the piece, Klein highlights the City's first-of-its kind diversion program to assist nonviolent offenders and other policies Columbus has implemented to make the city safer and more equitable.

Read the full op-ed below:

Washington Post: [Nonviolent offenders need help, not jail. That's what my city is giving them.](#)

[By: Zach Klein, 12/4/20]

Our criminal justice system is broken. Prisons are overcrowded. Recidivism runs rampant. Our system should keep communities safe by incarcerating dangerous offenders while rehabilitating those who can become productive members of society.

Historically, prosecutors have been trained to seek convictions and prison time. This makes sense for violent criminals who pose the greatest threats to public safety. But the vast majority of defendants are charged with nonviolent offenses. Many simply need help and a chance to change their lives.

Here in Columbus, the city attorney's office last year began a pretrial "diversion" program to identify and treat the root causes of why people commit crimes. It's called "diversion" because the emphasis is moving people toward rehabilitation, not incarceration.

With support from the retail industry, we began a pilot program focused on repeat offenders who were stealing from big-box stores. These offenders typically steal food, alcohol or other merchandise that can be resold for cash. We didn't target everyone: We excluded organized-crime rings. We also excluded first-time offenders, who were already being successfully served by existing programs.

But for individuals caught stealing a second, third or even eighth time, we developed a new approach. We enlisted health-care professionals to identify the core issue: Why does this person steal? What does he or she lack or need? Our goal was to understand the underlying reasons for stealing and then develop a plan to get the offenders help, rather than sending them to jail.

If someone stole because of hunger, we connect them to their local food pantry and require they visit the location. If they stole because of education- or employment-related issues, we provide access to GED prep courses or even introduce them to a local trade union. Individuals who stole furniture are connected with our local furniture bank. Those eligible for government benefits are provided help navigating the sometimes difficult ins and outs of online or in-person enrollment.

We connected a mother who said she stole a small mattress for her child to our city's initiative combating infant mortality. We linked another unemployed mom who stated she stole clothes for her children with an employer with job openings, as well as education on financial literacy. And we connected a homeless mother of three, charged with petty theft, with stable housing for her and her family.

In the 13 months we've been trying this, only six of the 77 participants have reoffended; based on this success, we are expanding this approach to other types of nonviolent misdemeanors, such as drug-related offenses, solicitation and criminal trespassing.

Once defendants complete the program, the court records are sealed.

We've also implemented other changes, such as ending the prosecution of misdemeanor marijuana possession charges, promoting the issuance of citations over arrests for most nonviolent offenses and essentially eliminating cash bail for all nonviolent misdemeanors. We also retrained our prosecutors for this new approach.

In our experience, judges and police support this novel approach because its purpose is to eliminate repeat offenders. It also allows law enforcement officers and courts to focus more on serious threats to public safety.

We're all better off if we retool the criminal justice system to help nonviolent offenders rather than ignoring the issues that contributed to their struggles. Otherwise, we perpetuate a broken system where individuals repeat their crimes and often end up with felony convictions that create lifelong barriers to stable employment and access to quality housing for them and their children.

My office is responsible for prosecuting only misdemeanor crimes within the city limits, ranging from traffic violations to domestic violence. But it's time for this approach to be adopted across the country. Otherwise we are simply tearing families apart, destroying neighborhoods and costing taxpayers billions. Our criminal justice system prevents people from getting jobs, housing and providing for their families. That makes no sense.

Incarceration will always have a role to play because there are dangerous people who deserve a prison sentence. Accountability is required, and victims must be protected. But prison cannot be viewed as the most effective solution for a majority of nonviolent crimes.

An effective criminal justice system of the future — one that earns the trust of our citizens and protects victims — will focus on root causes, address them individually, and by doing so, solve problems rather than create them. Only then can we make our communities safer.

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