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Drug & alcohol programs actually save money

By **DIANNE E. REED**

IN Southeastern Pennsylvania, a new coalition of providers called V3 — one voice for prevention, treatment and recovery support services — is helping legislators and taxpayers understand why adequate funding of drug and alcohol programs is important not only to the human condition, but also to the state and local bottom line.

It's important to understand that the cost of substance abuse has a big impact on citizens and government alike. In the city, \$156 million in property crimes were racked up in 2007, more than \$100 for every resident.

When the bad guys got caught, as a 2006 study by criminologist John Goldkamp showed, drug cases played the "central role" in prison population growth. This has meant an \$80 million increase in spending in the last five years. The upshot is taxpayers paying \$156 million in crime costs at the front door, but also \$240 million at the back door for jail costs.

Across the U.S., the fiscal crisis is compelling people to realize that such losses and spending levels aren't sustainable.

But there is a better way.

A National Treatment Improvement Evaluation Study followed the progress of more than 4,000 people who participated in federally funded treatment programs over a five-year period.

The study found an 80 percent drop in crime. Think about the potential for that kind of success right here in Philadelphia. Philadelphia's 60,400 annual property crimes would shrink mightily, resulting in \$120 million in savings to property owners.

And the study shows a 64 percent reduction in arrests, which would also mean fewer people in our city prisons, where the overburdened infrastructure is facing possible 10,000-inmate-a-day overcrowding this summer.

Here we could save \$153 million if we made the investment in drug, alcohol and mental-health programs that would keep people out of the crime stream. And if we put them to work when they're released

(25,000 re-enter our community every year), the National Treatment Study indicates the potential for a \$74 million bonus for the economy in wages, plus another \$24 million in taxes.

Take George Ruiz, a substance abuser from age 14 to 30. George committed a crime and did the time. But he also completed his treatment, and has successfully been in recovery for nine years.

The biggest bonus for George is being reunited with his son. He's also working two jobs, on a mission to help others stay in recovery. The national study has shown that 40-60 percent of participants are still in successful recovery after five years.

People can be trained to control their impulses. Children can learn it, too. And there's a nationally validated curriculum with skill-building tools to guide folks through the thicket of good decisions to be made about their health and their life.

How much do we need to invest to stimulate these benefits? Studies show you get \$10 of benefits for every \$1 invested in prevention, treatment and recovery programs. That's a return worth voting on.

The reverse is also true: Failing to fund prevention, treatment and recovery services adequately will cause related spending areas to grow. The state Senate wants to cut this funding by \$26 million. V3 has done the math, and we support the governor's proposals for new revenue and rainy-day fund withdrawals, which should be used to fund tangible services rather sit idle in an economic downturn.

To help Pennsylvania help itself, the V3 Coalition wants not only an end to drug and alcohol funding cuts, but also funding restored to levels of service that meet the need. Congress also needs to hear from Pennsylvanians that prevention, treatment and recovery funding must be sustained. Just do the math. ★

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