

# Coming Together to Improve Our Criminal Justice System

**Notwithstanding the best intentions of the people who work within it, the criminal justice system itself has many challenges. Here are a few. We should continue to find ways to do better.**

BY KELLI THOMPSON

In October, I left my position as Wisconsin State Public Defender, which was the honor of a lifetime. From my first day as an intern in Milwaukee, I knew this was the work I wanted to do. While the broader systemic successes as Public Defender were gratifying and had a significant effect on our work, I never wanted to lose sight of the clients who are the mission.

The criminal legal system is full of people who are dedicated and extremely mission driven. From my perspective, public defenders are the most critical part of the justice system. They are

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the only party that represents a person – a person who is so much more than the immediate case with their own history of trauma and challenges with housing, education, and employment. SPD attorneys are more than zealous, adversarial counsel for clients. We're also clients' social workers, friends, and links to their family and friends.

Departing this day-to-day work gives me a chance to look forward. Notwithstanding the best intentions of the people who work in the system, the system itself has many challenges. The criminal justice system is the most expensive, least effective way to handle many issues that result in people becoming justice involved. It is a crisis that prisons are the largest mental health treatment facility in Wisconsin. People with substance use disorders should not have to be convicted of crimes to access treatment. We should be questioning whether we're making the most efficient use of resources to protect public safety. Lengthy sentences, including initial confinement and extended

supervision, are not an effective deterrent and, at this point especially, are doing more harm than good.

Recidivism is often used as a measure of successful rehabilitation or community reintegration. Wisconsin's recidivism rates have not changed significantly as sentences have gotten longer and more crimes have been added to statutes. I have seen individuals sentenced to 18 months' initial confinement and 2 years' extended supervision for possession of marijuana. My current clients describe conditions in prisons that I don't think people are fully aware of. Significant staffing issues have limited programming, movement, treatment, and time outside cells for individuals in prison. People can be locked in the same cell for significant periods without access to treatment. It is not surprising that so many people are released from custody and then commit more offenses. The primary response – incarceration – is not making communities safer in the near term, and it causes long-term generational harm. We must continue to come together to find opportunities to respond to crimes in ways other than incarceration.

Looking forward, my sincere hope is that the criminal justice system can come together around the idea of holistic strategies to reduce harm and increase public safety. Finding ways to reduce the number of people who enter the justice system will benefit those people, their families, and the community at large. As it exists now, the criminal justice system is a hammer that treats every client as a nail. We should continue to find ways to do better. **WL**



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