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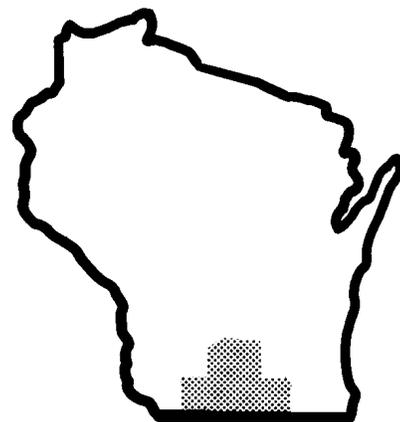
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A letter to the editor

September 28, 2007

Dear Sir,

The Dane County Judges have now had an opportunity to read the September 20, 2007 Criminal Justice System Assessment Final Report, submitted by the Institute for Law and Policy Planning. This report focuses on reducing the number of inmates in the Dane County jail. No one and no group, either within the criminal justice community or outside of it, is more concerned with jail overcrowding than the Judges. This is a topic of critical importance to the county; for both financial and philosophical reasons. The County Board is to be commended for bringing in an outside consultant to offer a fresh perspective and make recommendations for positive change.

As acknowledged in the report, the Dane County Circuit Court has over time "...thoughtfully evaluated the functions of the criminal justice system and has initiated alternative programs aimed at reducing (jail) crowding." I believe we can diligently and conscientiously continue to explore ways to improve the system in a manner that is both cost-effective and safe for our citizens and which does not negatively affect the remainder of the judicial system (i.e., family law, small claims, civil and probate). Some things can be done immediately or in the short term. Others will involve more time and collaboration. Some may save money or have an immediate impact on the jail population while others may not. Some may cost money.

In a meeting on Thursday, September 27, the Judges agreed to take the following steps immediately, as recommended by the report. Information on in-custody defendants will be regularly provided by the jail, and in conjunction with existing court reports, be used to process in-custody cases more quickly. Court automation, provided by the state court system, will provide a tickler system to be used to identify cases approaching the time for disposition to alert courts to prioritize a hearing. I have approached the Dane County Municipal Judges to explore the use of collection agency referrals in place of commitment to the Dane County jail for failure to pay municipal court fees and fines. This has a potential of reducing the jail population. A group has already met once to develop fair, consistent and rapid procedures to evaluate those arrested to facilitate earlier release. The Drug Treatment Court already eliminated the Education Track earlier this year. Courts will implement procedures to increase efficiency in scheduling. Other changes that can be implemented without delay will become apparent as we move forward.

I am confident that the judges, working with system partners, will identify areas where modifications to current practices can be introduced and, if given county administrative support, can be successfully implemented. I pledge the efforts of the court to a timely, comprehensive and systemic examination of the recommendations, balancing the goal of relieving jail crowding against the protection of individual rights, public safety and the integrity of the law.

Sincerely,
C. William Foust, Chief Judge
5th Judicial District

