

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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PRISON REFORM FOR SAFER, HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES

By Barbara Sella, Associate Director for Respect Life and Social Concerns

Wisconsin's prisons are full of men and women whose non-violent crimes were fueled by underlying mental health and addiction issues. To address this issue, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference is supporting a statewide campaign to divert future non-violent offenders into community-based treatment programs.

The "11x15 For Safer, Healthier Communities" campaign, organized by the faith-based group WISDOM, seeks to reduce Wisconsin's prison population by half – to 11,000 inmates – by 2015. The number 11,000 was chosen because it would bring the state's per capita incarceration rate in line with neighboring Minnesota, which has comparable crime rates and demographics. Moreover, in 1995, Wisconsin's prison population was around 11,000. Today it stands at about 22,000. In 1990, the Department of Corrections had a budget of \$200 million. Today the budget is \$1.3 billion, higher than the state's investment in the University of Wisconsin system.

The 11x15 campaign aims to expand the state's Treatment Alternatives and Diversions (TAD) program, which was signed into law in 2005. Counties that wish to address crime-related drug and alcohol addiction in their communities can apply for state TAD funding to establish their own diversion and treatment programs. These programs range from drug and alcohol treatment courts to mental health treatment courts and day reporting centers.

Currently, six counties operate TAD programs (Rock, Dane, Wood, Washington, Burnett, and Washburn). Milwaukee operates a seventh TAD program, but receives its funding from the federal government.

Many more counties have expressed interest in starting their own TAD programs, but for this to happen Wisconsin has to provide additional funds. The program currently spends about \$1 million of state funds. WISDOM estimates that it would take approximately \$75 million dollars to expand the program to each of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

In December 2011, the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute issued an evaluation of the TAD program for the four-year period from 2007-2010 ("Treatment Alternatives and Diversion (TAD) Program: Advancing Effective Diversion in Wisconsin").

The evaluation concluded that TAD works. It found that 76 percent of TAD participants did not reoffend after having completed the program. It estimated that for every \$1 of TAD funding, the criminal justice system saved almost \$2. Monitoring and treating offenders in the community is significantly less expensive than keeping them in prison. The annual cost of housing an inmate is about \$32,000. The average annual cost of participating in TAD is under \$8,000.

But the savings to the criminal justice system are only part of the picture. Equally, if not more important, is the benefit to the wider community. TAD participants are closely guided, monitored, and encouraged to connect or reconnect with family, a faith tradition, employers, educational institutions, and health care providers. Successful participation means less crime, fewer foster home placements, stronger families, greater employment. Of course, TAD programs will not be able to help everyone, but they are an essential first step.

Wisconsin is expected to have a \$419.7 million surplus in the next budget, some of which could be used to pay for TAD's expansion. In the weeks and months to come, the WCC will be encouraging lawmakers to seize the opportunity to refashion our correctional system in a way that truly makes us a safer and stronger community.

To learn more about the 11x15 campaign, visit the WISDOM website www.prayforjusticewi.org or contact Barbara Sella (Barbara@wisconsincatholic.org). The WCC's legislative lobby day, *Catholics at the Capitol*, on April 10, will include a breakout session on the 11x15 campaign. Registration materials are available at www.wisconsincatholic.org.