

Lehigh County shifts \$500k from corrections to prevention

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing November 7, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder 

Gadfly keeping an eye on what's going on around us. Gadfly guesses we might call this action in Allentown "defunding."

Selections from Geoff Brace and Dave Harrington, "Your View: by two Lehigh County commissioners: Why we need to reform the criminal justice system." Morning Call, November 6, 2020.

As Lehigh County commissioners, our commitment is to contribute to the dismantling of white supremacy and the institutions that reinforce it. In early 2020, the Lehigh County Board of Commissioners began reviewing the policies and practices of the county that may contribute to these problems.

Reviewing the county's criminal justice system and pushing for reforms that are morally just makes good sense for the taxpayers and ensures safe communities for everybody in Lehigh County.

The board's Courts and Corrections Committee has met several times to dive deeply into these issues.

These conversations, informed by self-reported and publicly available information, have paved the way for budget and policy suggestions.

Also gleaned by these conversations are the reports from other county departments and elected officials. For instance, it may not have become public knowledge that the Lehigh County Court Administration is working on creating a Drug Court to handle addiction as a disease and not a crime in many cases.

In 2018, 16% of offenders in Lehigh County were charged for new criminal offenses within one year. With the most recent data from 2016,

33% of offenders would be charged with a new crime within three years. Simply said, the cycle of crime, even with fewer total offenses, continues.

We need to take steps to address many of the underlying issues contributing to criminal activity. When one in three individuals going through the criminal justice system returns within three years, we are squandering lives and taxpayer dollars.

Budgets are more than plans for revenue and expenditures. They are moral documents and reflect taxpayer priorities. With the county jail population significantly down, some of the excess funding is better used to fund prevention.

To that end, the board of commissioners unanimously voted to shift almost \$500,000 in funds from the Corrections Department, devoting those funds to youth violence prevention, services for individuals reentering society after incarceration and homelessness prevention.

Every youth steered away from a gang, every former inmate who finds gainful and meaningful employment upon reentry and every person kept in safe housing represents critical steps in successfully avoiding the criminal justice system.

This is a down payment on our commitment to fulfilling the promise of liberty and justice for all in Lehigh County. We are not done. Jail is not a substitute for mental health and addiction treatment. Communities get better through cooperation and investment, not criminalization and incarceration.

We need to reform Lehigh County's criminal justice system further by ensuring effective legal representation, fixing the broken mental health care system and addressing root causes of crime.

Many in the county care deeply about reform but, too often, institutions cannot see their own blind spots. While it may be politically expedient to simply jail people, it is ineffective in addressing society's problems, wastes tax dollars and takes a toll on human lives.