

Criminal justice cycle must end: Time for treatment, not more prisons

Written by Dr. Henrie M. Treadwell
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In communities across America, citizens, public officials and civic leaders fight against the criminal justice cycle. It's the maddening sequence in which people are incarcerated for drug-related crimes, returned to their neighborhoods without counseling, treatment or healthcare, and then swiftly sent back to prison for resuming old habits.

Since our nation adopted the mass incarceration strategy four decades ago, this public policy has devastated communities of color. But now, there is hope.

The Community Voices Program at Morehouse School of Medicine recently sponsored its annual Community Voices, Freedom Voices Conference, where the hundreds of people attending demanded that our civic and political leaders put an end to the demeaning cycle. They spoke of the millions spent to build prisons, while pennies go toward drug treatment. They spoke of communities like Baltimore, where 40,000 heroin addicts roam the streets. They spoke of the \$40,000 to \$47,000 a year it costs to house a prisoner versus the \$5,000 for mental health and drug counseling--yet states repeatedly make the wrong choices.

More importantly, our conference heard the voices of people who have suffered through the cycle. Their experiences vividly exposed the flaws in the criminal justice system. Listen to the voice of Lorna Hogan. She is now the Associate Director of the Sacred Authority Parent Advocacy Group in Washington, D.C., but the path she followed exemplifies what's wrong with our society, what's wrong with the criminal justice system and what absolutely must be fixed.

"This is my story: A mother abused, a mother with an untreated addiction too afraid to ask for help because there was no help available. I am the mother of four children. I began self-medicating with marijuana and alcohol at the age of 14. It was the only way I knew how to cope with being physically, sexually abused. But after a while, the combination was no longer working. I needed something stronger to help me cope, and I began using crack cocaine. Crack cocaine would take me to horrible places I never imagined. The once-clean police record I had become stained with drug-related crimes I committed to support my habit. My children were definitely affected by my drug use. I was not a mother to them.

"I couldn't stop using. I tried 28-day treatment programs, but I was just detoxing. I was not getting help for the emotional pain I kept suppressed by using drugs. There were no services provided for me as a mother. There were no services for my children. There were no opportunities to heal as a family. In December 2000, I was arrested on a drug-related charge, and my children were placed with child protective services. When I went before the judge for sentencing, I begged him for treatment, and the judge refused my request.

"I felt hopeless. I not only lost my children; I lost myself. I didn't know where my children were or what was happening to them. I felt I would never see them again. In jail I received no treatment. I was surrounded by women like myself, mothers. We were all there in jail suffering from untreated addiction, but there were no treatment services in jail for us. When I was released, there were no referrals to after-care treatment programs. I was released to the street at 10 o'clock at night with \$4 in my pocket, and I still didn't know where my children were. I went back to doing the only thing I knew, which was using drugs, and I felt myself sinking back into a life of self-degradation.

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"Months later, by the grace of God, I finally found someone to listen to me, and that was a child-welfare worker who was assigned to my case. She referred me to an 18-month family treatment program. A family treatment program is where a mother can go with her children and the family as a whole unit receives help together. In family treatment I addressed the underlying reasons for my addiction. I identified the many ways that I self-medicated to (ease) my pain. I had a therapist to help me address the guilt and shame of being a mother who used drugs. I had a primary counselor I could talk to at any time. I also had parenting classes that gave me insight into being a mother.

"When my children were returned to me during treatment, my children received therapeutic services so that they could heal from my addiction and being separated from me. Today I'm a graduate of that comprehensive family treatment program. I...recovered from substance abuse. My children and I have been reunified for seven years, and they are (succeeding) academically in school. I'm also a PTA mom today."

That's the story of hope, a story of a woman who finally received the treatment she needed and turned her life around. How many others could have positive outcomes, if they receive the services they need, instead of cold prison walls?

It's time America found out.

Dr. Henrie M. Treadwell is director of Community Voices at Morehouse School of Medicine, a nonprofit organization working to improve health services and health-care access for all Americans. To arrange a print or broadcast interview with Dr. Treadwell, please contact Alicia Ingram, 404-493-1724, ingramalicia@bellsouth.net.