

SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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Symposium will discuss future of criminal justice system

Thomas Clouse The Spokesman-Review

If you go

Smart Justice Symposium

WHEN: Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

WHERE: Northern Quest Resort and Casino, 100 N. Hayford Road in Airway Heights.

COST: \$20 for community members; \$35 for those who are part of an organization. Some scholarships are available for those who can't afford but want to attend.

INFORMATION: Call Anne Martin at (509) 624-5657.

Faced with the prospect next year of going to voters to fund a new \$200 million jail, Spokane County leaders are teaming up with community activists for a discussion about alternatives to put fewer people in jail while also reducing crime.

Virtually every stakeholder, from new Spokane police Chief Frank Straub to judges to mental health professionals, will meet Friday for the Smart Justice Symposium, an all-day event at Northern Quest Resort and Casino.

"The whole idea is a safer community and less cost and doing things that actually change people's lives so they don't have to go back into the system," said attorney Breean Beggs, the event's planning chairman. "All the speakers are people working in the trenches. This is not theoretical. This is real. This day is to give the community a base line of information of what is actually possible."

The event grew out of several efforts, including a group fighting Spokane County's plan to build a new jail. Those activists joined with attorneys at the community law firm Center for Justice and began looking for ideas, said Rick Eichstaedt, the center's executive director.

"We have people who come to us who are being sent to jail for minor crimes, whose lives are being torn apart," he said. "If we are going to spend \$200 million for a jail, what else could we do ... that would be more effective and cheaper? We want a community discourse."

Spokane County Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich endorsed the symposium and will be one of many featured speakers about the challenges faced by local law enforcement. While some reforms have already succeeded in getting prosecutors, law enforcement and judges to work together, Knezovich says, need for a new jail hasn't gone away.

County commissioners tabled the jail issue last year and have not yet decided when to put the issue to voters, he said. Discussions about a new jail started in 1995, and current bed counts

have climbed into the 900s, which often forces jailers into emergency status on weekends, where they only admit those arrested for the most serious crimes.

“It’s not all about building a new facility,” Knezovich said. “We need to make sure we are building a criminal justice system that is efficient. But we also have to have jail space for those who just need to be in jail.”

The county already has championed programs to help inmates get drug and alcohol treatment, financial planning assistance and jobs. Other programs allow nonviolent offenders out of jail to work or serve their sentences on work crews cleaning streets and parks.

“There’s been a lot of work to find every means possible to keep people who don’t need to be in jail out of the system,” he said.

One Superior Court program is called Early Case Resolution. Its goal is to get law enforcement to quickly forward cases to attorneys, who funnel them into hearings that deliver the same justice in a fraction of the time.

The quicker justice model has cut down on warrants against those who failed to show in court; helps offenders keep their jobs, which allows them to pay their financial obligations; and helps them find treatment for drug or mental health issues that often lead to new crimes.

Superior Court Judge Maryann Moreno said the program has been a huge success because it allows people to solve their problems without clogging beds at the jail. However, the county has not yet found a way to quantify how much money is being saved through the program.

“It’s putting the focus on the front end rather than damage control on the back end,” Moreno said. “People don’t like change. But kicking and screaming we all went, and now that we are seeing good results, people are excited about it.”

Straub, the police chief, said he will talk about successes he had in White Plains, N.Y., where they started a program to get mental health practitioners to respond to situations along with police officers to help resolve situations such as someone threatening to jump from a bridge.

Straub said he met two weeks ago with local mental health officials to start a program here as part of a continued commitment to train Spokane police officers on how to deal with mentally ill people during dangerous situations.

“Everybody, even officers, needs a base line in training to deal with mentally ill people,” he said. “In all fairness to my predecessors, that base line has already been established. But we need to continue to build on it.”

Beggs said part of the challenge is to convince officials from several jurisdictions and disciplines to buy into the ideas during a time when budgets continue to be cut.

“Moving the whole system forward is a leadership challenge,” he said. “People are starting to move, but they need the information about what works and doesn’t work. The challenge is to realign the amount of money that will save money for us in the long run.”