

KITSAP SUN

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MY TURN | What can you do with a dime?

James Docter is presiding judge for Bremerton Municipal Court. He wrote this opinion on behalf of Judge Anna M. Laurie, Kitsap County Superior Court, and Judge Jay B. Roof, Adult Drug Court.

During the 2005 legislative session, the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Reform Act passed the Washington Legislature with strong bipartisan support. That legislation authorized counties to increase the local sales tax by 1/10 of 1 percent (10 cents per \$100 purchase). Money collected under that law must be used solely for the purposes identified in that law: provision of chemical dependency services, provision of mental health treatment, related housing, and funding therapeutic court programs and services.

Since 2005, 20 of Washington's 39 counties have adopted this provision. Our county commissioners are now considering enactment here in Kitsap. What is the need that drives such legislation and why adopt it here?

National studies confirm what those of us in the criminal justice system know: almost 80 percent of adults, and 67-70 percent of juveniles who have contact with the criminal justice system suffer from mental health and/or substance abuse disorders. The traditional model of criminal justice is to punish offenders to hold them accountable for their actions. That model has shifted over several decades to include intervention and rehabilitation, as well as accountability. Therapeutic courts are one proven mechanism to serve these dual purposes and prevent continued, expensive recycling of untreated offenders through the court system, jails and prisons.

The Superior Court of Kitsap County presides over several therapeutic courts: Adult Drug Court, Family Dependency Drug Court, Juvenile Drug Court, Individualized Treatment Court (Mental Health Court for Juvenile Offenders), and most recently a Veterans Court focusing on returning military personnel caught in the criminal justice system. The human successes have been well documented in this newspaper over the years.

The fiscal success of these courts is also well studied. The National Association of Drug Court Professionals reports nationwide, every \$1 invested in drug courts save taxpayers as much as \$3.36 in avoided criminal justice costs alone. When considering other cost offsets such as savings from reduced victimization and health care utilization, studies have shown benefits ranging up to \$27 for every \$1 invested.

Providing treatment and intervention better protects us from property crimes, vagrancy and violence. Intervention also helps those suffering mental health or substance abuse issues return home as productive societal members, able to add to our community rather than subtract from it.

What can we do with a dime? We could raise \$3.1 million per year with a fractional increase in sales tax collected and spent in Kitsap County. Some of that money could build on the success of our therapeutic courts to turn lives around. It could help keep teens alive by making teen suicide screening and prevention available in school districts, reducing needless deaths each year. We could train first responders how to deal with someone in a mental health or drug induced crisis. We could provide stable housing for the mentally ill, with built-in supportive services.

The need is clear. The mechanism for instituting this tax increase has been studied by 20 other counties and discussed here for 8 years. The time for action is now.

Anna Laurie is presiding judge of Kitsap County Superior Court. She writes on behalf of herself and Judge James Docter of Bremerton Municipal Court and Judge Jay Roof of Kitsap Adult Drug Court.

Editor's note: Judge Docter was incorrectly attributed as the writer on initial publication.