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Editorial: Coordinating efforts in the justice system is good news

The call for a new jail in Spokane County has triggered an all-points bulletin for cost savings throughout the entire criminal justice system. On Wednesday, county and city officials agreed to officially coordinate their efforts by possibly combining jail, courts, prosecution, public defenders and probation.

“We started with a discussion around the costs of incarceration, but realized that was far too limiting,” said Mayor David Condon, according to a news release. “The jail is the last stop in the system. We can’t achieve the savings and community benefits we need, if we never address what’s happening in other places in the system.”

That’s true, though the county implemented many changes to reduce the jail population as it prepared to ask taxpayers whether they would agree to finance a new jail at the estimated cost of \$199 million. However, the city’s plan to send inmates to Benton County has caused the county to announce closing the Geiger Correctional Facility before a replacement can be built.

The price tag in Benton County is \$56 per inmate per day. In Spokane County, it’s as high as \$130. But at some point, Benton County will need those beds, and the community will be stuck.

Wednesday’s joint announcement that the city and county will coordinate and collaborate on a solution is welcome news. The city is vying for a Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Mayors Challenge grant to finance the work of a joint task force. Spokane County Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich has been a longtime supporter of combined law enforcement efforts. Frank Straub, the city’s new director of law enforcement, has experience overseeing consolidated services.

Officials hope to build on the gains from relatively new drug and mental health courts and alternative sentencing strategies. The idea is to cut down on re-arrests by focusing on programs that break the cycle of crime. Under the old warehousing model, the combined county jail population could reach as high as 1,300 on a given day. Now, 800 inmates is a more typical figure.

However, that’s still more offenders than our jail facilities can safely handle.

Public support for alternative punishments and treatment programs are a critical component of the solution. So is the willingness to expand access to mental health. Knezovich says he runs the largest mental health facility in Eastern Washington. That this is a jail instead of a hospital is a disservice to patients and taxpayers.

If voters decide to decriminalize marijuana, that may help, too.

It was public demand from decades ago that diverted more dollars into arrests, prosecutions and incarcerations. But the demand hasn’t been matched by a tolerance for higher taxation. So, officials have no choice but to look for alternatives and to possibly combine some services.

If that produces a leaner, smarter and fairer criminal justice system, the community comes out ahead.