



### **‘POINT OF VIEW’ REGARDING SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN OKLAHOMA**

Recently, the state news “Roundup” section of one Oklahoma newspaper carried three stories – all of them related to the devastating aftermath of substance abuse in Oklahoma.

The first story concerned jail overcrowding in Duncan, with 136 inmates being crammed into a facility designed for 80. Another had to do with a former Enid High School football star receiving a 50-year prison sentence for drug-related charges. This young man, Enid’s leading rusher and receiver in 2000, completed a boot camp-style program for young offenders last summer, but later was arrested for driving under the influence and possession of drugs. The third story dealt with a young Waurika mother, charged with child abuse after the death of her infant daughter, who was born testing positive for amphetamines and barbiturates.

The common thread that links these stories is that most Oklahomans with a substance abuse problem who break the law are never, ever helped. Instead, they are placed behind bars where they will spend the largest portion of their lives and cost state taxpayers millions of dollars a year.

As the state agency responsible for substance abuse treatment in Oklahoma, we know there’s a better way to do this. We continue to send people to prison who should be given an opportunity for treatment – *not* boot camp.

We know that treatment works and that recovery is possible, and that an investment of even a small portion of these same dollars into substance abuse treatment, instead of prison, could save us untold future expenses.

Keeping people with substance abuse problems behind bars isn't the answer, but providing treatment for these people – accompanied with supervised probation, in some cases – is a preferable alternative. The cost difference for treatment versus incarceration is huge – less than \$3,000 annually for intensive outpatient treatment, compared with \$15,000-\$20,000 for prison.

One vital area in which we must provide more services, especially, is in the area of pregnant women and women with dependent children. Last year, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services opened the Tulsa Women and Children's Center, a facility that has enjoyed astounding success. However, the waiting list is long and we desperately need another such facility in the Oklahoma City area. Chances are the young woman from Waurika could have received help for her addiction, and given birth to a healthy baby, had she been given access to these services. Instead, she will spend years behind bars, probably paying an internal price far greater than any of us will ever know.

We know that substance abuse is the primary cause of most of Oklahoma's societal ills, including divorce, domestic violence, accidents and child abuse. It is a significant negative factor in every problem area addressed by state government, ranging from health care to single parenting to crime, yet funding is never adequate to treat this issue.

More attention needs to be given to the benefits of substance abuse treatment. If we're ever going to break the cycle of addiction, we must start now.



Sincerely,

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