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Treatment bound: All rehab facilities should be subject to state oversight

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

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How the state of Alabama treats non-violent drug offenders is changing. Regardless of whether it's because of (a.) the state's dire financial crisis, (b.) prison overcrowding or (c.) policymakers seeking better results, Alabama is moving toward a model of favoring treatment over punishment.

The logic is sound enough. Break a nonviolent drug offender's narcotics habit, and the reason for keeping him or her behind bars goes away, as well. The state's previous answer — lock 'em up for years — did nothing to combat the source of their law-breaking. Money is too scarce and the lives of these men and women too valuable to not seek solutions that work.

Did we mention money is scarce? Yes, of course. It's Alabama, where even in good times the state has a difficult time affording the things required of a well-functioning government. In today's lackluster economy, Alabama has even less. Less staff to watch over public safety. Less assets to prosecute crimes. And less watchdogs to protect the public.

On that last count, an article by Cameron Steele in Sunday's Star ("Courts & Rehab: Some local, state officials at odds over how to treat drug offenders") illustrates the point. Local courts are allowing nonviolent drug offenders an opportunity to seek treatment for their problems as an alternative to spending a stretch in already overcrowded prisons. The rub is that many defendants are choosing to seek treatment at non-certified treatment centers, most of which are faith-based; many certified facilities are inaccessible because of long waiting lists, Steele reported.

There's a division over whether faith-based treatment centers are subject to regulation. On one side is a state law that allows religiously affiliated centers to avoid any regulation. State Department of Mental Health officials disagree; they contend their charge is oversight of all rehabs, whether they are faith-based or not.

Clearly, the job done by drug-treatment facilities is so important that all should meet basic standards for the care of patients. As the criminal justice system comes to depend more on these facilities, it's imperative that they meet state requirements for care and treatment of clients. Yet, even if that was the consensus in Alabama, the state would not have enough employees to do a proper job of certification.

As sources from the local courthouse told The Star, many of these facilities do excellent work in turning around the lives of men and women lost in a world addiction. We praise that important work. At the same time, we ask that the state step up to make sure all these facilities are following proper procedures.

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