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EDITORIAL

Program for offenders that just might work

Travis County State District Judge Charlie Baird says: 'The best anti-crime program is a job.'

Friday, August 15, 2008

Over the course of his judicial career, Charlie Baird has caused more than his share of head shaking. He was controversial as a judge on the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals and has attracted plenty of attention — positive and negative — during his first term as a Travis County state district judge.

Baird's inclination to keep all but the most incorrigible defendants out of prison doesn't sit well with criminal justice hardliners. But even his most ardent detractors should concede that he is absolutely right when he says: "The best anti-crime program is a job."

Baird is aggressively trying to help the 1,800 probationers he supervises find employment. It's not easy finding a job in a down economy, but it's even tougher if a criminal conviction is included on the résumé.

As the American-Statesman's Steven Kreytak reported in Tuesday's editions, Baird set up space next to his courtroom for city employment counselors to help probationers get their job searches started.

The program obviously won't work for every defendant, but neither does merely locking up offenders and trusting to fate that they will somehow find the straight and narrow. Baird steers non-violent offenders into the program, and that's appropriate enough.


A certain amount of skepticism is healthy with any government program, regardless of its good intentions.

We already know, however, that a "lock 'em up" approach leads to crowded jails and prisons that are breeding grounds for more crime. Most offenders get out eventually and about a third of them end up right back in prison.

According to statistics compiled by Marc Levin of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, 31 percent of Texas inmates return to prison — a high rate of failure considering the millions Texas taxpayers put into the criminal justice system.

Baird's program deserves a chance to turn his theory of success into reality. "Lock 'em up and throw away the key" sounds good to some, but "turn 'em into taxpayers" sounds better to us.

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