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from Anne Deacon

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Seattle police officers got the surprise of their lives the day a woman approached with cocaine rocks in her hand and asked to be arrested.

"I want to be enrolled in the LEAD program," she said, referring to a new initiative aimed at diverting people who are frequently arrested into social services and treatment.

Since its debut in Seattle in 2011, the law enforcement assisted diversion (LEAD) program has created nationwide buzz. Under a LEAD program, a law enforcement officer can choose to divert a person who has committed a low-level drug or sex work offense to a case manager instead of incarceration. The case manager then works with the client to create a unique service plan focused on improving quality of life and reducing criminal behavior. In many cases, clients are seeking food, housing, job opportunities or treatment for a drug addiction.

During the second week of May 2016, the first three institutions to launch a LEAD program, the Seattle Public Defender Association (Seattle, Washington); Santa Fe Police Department (Santa Fe, New Mexico) and Albany Police Department (Albany, New York), met in North Carolina for a caravan tour of law enforcement departments interested in learning about LEAD. At each stop, the presenters met with police officers, sheriff deputies, district attorneys, public health department officials, substance abuse treatment providers and concerned citizens. The discussions left a trail of thought-provoking conversation that had everyone excited about change.

The existing LEAD programs started for different reasons. In Seattle, the program was born out of conflict between the police department and the public defenders office over racial disparities in drug arrests. In Santa Fe, the staggering burden of property crimes due to drug addiction led the department to seek alternative solutions. In Albany, neighborhood groups were unhappy with aggressive policing tactics and demanded reform. But what they all had in common was an agreement that the status quo "war on drugs" tactics weren't working. Drugs were cheaper and more plentiful than ever. Drug related property crimes were at an all-time high. Local government budgets were groaning under the cost of incarcerating so many drug offenders. And no one felt safer.

Law enforcement in particular was frustrated at the revolving door in the criminal justice system. Because prosecutor's offices don't always have the money to prosecute for low level drug offenses (choosing, wisely, to divert their resources to more serious crimes), officers often arrest someone on a street corner and spend hours booking them in jail, only to return the next day and see the same person back on the same corner doing the same thing. Some drug users have been arrested over 50 times without altering their behavior in the least.

"We have been fighting against drugs since 1972 and have not gained ground," says Chief Mike James of the Leland Police Department, who co-hosted one of the LEAD events in North Carolina. "We are here to learn about a different approach."

By diverting people BEFORE they enter the criminal justice system, LEAD actually changes behavior and reduces crime. The Seattle program evaluation showed that after 2 years, LEAD participants were 58% less likely to recidivate than their counterparts. While the average incarceration costs \$42 per day, participation in LEAD costs only \$17.50 per day after the initial high utilization period.

But above the tangible results of reduced recidivism and cost savings, LEAD is about relationships. LEAD brings together law enforcement, district attorneys, public defenders, community treatment and service providers together to talk about solutions to complex problems. As Kris Nyrop, one of the Seattle LEAD's founding members, explains, "LEAD breaks silos and gets people talking to one another who would normally only meet in a courtroom."

But perhaps LEAD's greatest achievement is that it demonstrates that there is hope for people addicted to opiates, a population often written off by traditional abstinence-based diversion programs. LEAD recognizes that working with opiate-addicted clients means that cessation of drug use may not be a realistic goal, particularly in the short term. To that end, the case manager and LEAD client work together to improve the client's quality of life and reduce criminal behaviors, which may or may not involve reducing or stopping drug use.

"Change takes a while," explains Kris Nyrop. "Our clients often start by asking for food, housing and help getting ID cards. After a few months they may start to seek drug treatment - once their basic needs are taken care of. Sometimes they take three steps forward, five steps back, three more forward, etc."

The model can be illustrated like this: Let's say we have a man addicted to heroin. He frequently shoplifts or commits other crimes to support his habit and rotates in and out of jail. Each time he is released from incarceration he runs a high risk of overdosing on drugs because his tolerance level has gone down. After three years, he can't find work or housing because of his felony record. He is still using drugs and committing crimes.

But let's say that this man is enrolled in LEAD. Instead of being arrested for shoplifting, he will be offered food so he doesn't have to steal to eat and housing because evidence shows that having a home can stabilize other aspects of a person's life. The man stops committing crimes, enrolls in a methadone program to manage his heroin addiction and finds a job at a local construction company. After a few months, for whatever reason, he starts to use illicit drugs again, but instead of going on a shame-filled binge of drugs and crime, as so often happens during a relapse, he calls his case manager and asks for help. The case manager responds immediately and the man is once again provided with his basic needs, given naloxone to prevent an overdose, and re-enrolled in a methadone program. He relapses a couple more times over the next three years, but each time he is taken back into the LEAD program and offered resources to get back on track.

Some might say that the LEAD program is a failure or an enabler because clients relapse. But LEAD is far more effective than the business-as-usual approach to the drug problem. Without LEAD, the man only stopped using drugs when he was in jail. Without supportive overdose prevention services, each time he left he was at risk of an overdose. And his journey through the criminal justice system came at a high cost to taxpayers in addition to saddling him with a felony record that may prevent him from ever becoming a productive, working member of society. LEAD isn't a perfect fix, but it does offer hope and periods of stability to people who have long been written off as lost causes, all while reducing crime and saving taxpayer dollars that currently prop up the criminal justice system.

The law enforcement and community members who attended the LEAD events in North Carolina walked away excited at the collaborative opportunities. Captain Lars Paul of the Fayetteville Police Department spoke about the kinds of friendships and collaborations created by LEAD.

"Who would have ever thought that SWAT team cops would be hanging out with harm reductionists?" he joked. "But on a serious note, police are evolving in the way we approach the drug war. Why create felons if we don't have to? Instead of focusing on what to do with people after they get out of prison, we can stop sending them there in the first place and get them help."