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Arizona Prosecuting Attorneys' Advisory Council

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**OPED: ARIZONA RISKS TRAUMA WITHOUT FUNDING FOR PROBLEM SOLVING COURTS IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE.**

It may be that Arizona has the largest Problem Solving Courts Conference in the country. At least that was an observation by a nationally-based speaker who was in attendance last week in Prescott where 400+ judges, probation officers, treatment providers, defense attorneys, prosecutors, social workers and peers from across the state met to learn about the latest research on changing behaviors and turning defendants into successful clients, rather than turning out more criminals.

This occurred on the exact same day that Baltimore erupted into violence after the funeral services for Freddie Gray, who was on at least his 5th arrest in 2015 and his 18th since 2007, mostly drug related, according to the public record.

The riot spread outward from a high school while we sat in beautiful Prescott learning how trauma and substance abuse impacts the brain, creating impediments to recovery that if not addressed properly, only makes the person worse.

The next day we heard how a nationally acclaimed social scientist would define a criminal justice system to fill in for the education, treatment and training that people who are suffering from the effects of poverty, mental illness, substance abuse, military service and trauma really need in order to avoid the system. He surmised that achieving that feat would effectively be reserving the criminal justice system for those true psychopaths who will never be able to function in society and thus should be segregated from it.

People like Freddie are probably in the criminal system because of changeable behaviors they cannot fix themselves. In Arizona, problem solving courts strive to help participants learn to change their behavior.

Ironically, public safety is on the rise as crime rates decrease but public perception is the exact opposite. The nightly news feeds this erroneous public opinion, highlighting the crimes of the day and providing 24-hour coverage of incidents like Baltimore.

Like that crime statistic, the passionate 400 who filled those Prescott rooms are virtually invisible to the general public.

Even as they are learning new ideas to turning perpetrators back from the despair leading them to the anti-social/criminal behavior that is taxing public resources and filling jails and prisons, between break-outs they are hearing about the elimination of funding and cuts in programs. Luckily for Arizona, these eternal optimists apparently heed their own counsel and focus on hope. Not daunted by shrinking resources, they can't wait to get back to work (along with the many risks of working with the high risk/high need population) to incorporate the research that is expanding their tools.

As the session closed, a "rock-god" celebrity poured out his heart and shared the long road, fueled by a drug court experience, to his greatest achievement: sobriety and helping other people, one cannot help but reflect on how many Freddie Grays won't ever get that chance because we can't afford it. Frankly, if we are going to follow the President's call to turn around the thuggery and criminality that is on display in incidents like in Baltimore, it is going to take an investment in treatment capacity and attracting professionals to these fields.

Public safety is a fundamental function of government, but it doesn't come cheap, at least in the short run. Problem solving court professionals can heal the community, one criminal at a time, but only if the community values it.

The Arizona Association of Drug Court Professionals consists of judges, attorneys, probation professionals, social workers, peers and others working on criminal justice within Drug, Mental Health, Veterans and Homeless courts throughout Arizona.