

Director's column: The evidence tells us we are on the right track

By A. John Voelker, Director of State Courts

The headline of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial on March 1 declares: "State's Tough on Crime Approach Hasn't Worked." The body of the commentary goes on to say that prison is the only alternative for violent criminals who are dangerous to the community, but that we need to be smarter about how we try to change the behavior of those who don't meet that description. The editorial says, "We've got to slow down prison's revolving door."



A. John Voelker

In the last few years judges around Wisconsin have been leading the way and pursuing different approaches in their jurisdictions to do just that – improve outcomes for offenders, reduce recidivism, and increase public safety. In addition, the Effective Justice Strategies Subcommittee of the Supreme Court's Planning and Policy Advisory Committee (PPAC) has

worked hard to facilitate the use of new, more effective approaches to improving the criminal justice system.

We are at a point now where we know we can do better than we have in the past. The questions to ask now:

- Are we on the right track with these programs?
- Are the approaches we are taking in Wisconsin as good or better than those tried elsewhere in the nation?
- What more should we be doing?

These are questions, from my perspective, that need to be thoroughly and thoughtfully considered.

Toward this goal, my office contracted with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to take a look at our efforts to date. The goal of the NCSC study, which was paid for through a grant, was to help us determine what practices and programs are most closely associated with successful outcomes and to provide recommendations on the court system's role in fostering statewide support and replication

of these strategies.

I won't go into detail about the project findings or the recommendations because that information is covered in other articles (*see stories on front page and pages 9-10*), but it is clear that we are on the right track. Counties throughout the state are using research-supported approaches to improve the justice system and seeing positive results.

The idea that we are on the right track is further supported with national recognition of the evidence-based practices in Milwaukee and Eau Claire. The counties were among seven "seed sites" chosen nationally by the National Institute of Corrections to receive federal technical assistance grants for the second phase of a three-phase program

The goal of phase one, which both counties participated in, was to build a framework that would follow offenders from arrest through final disposition and discharge that would result in more collaborative, evidence-based decision making and practices. Criminal justice stakeholders in Milwaukee County are pioneering ways to systemically improve the usefulness and value of risk-based needs assessments for defendants at the earliest stages of the criminal justice process. (*See story, page 10*).

Eau Claire County has set specific goals in reducing recidivism, criminal caseloads and incarceration levels.

Of course, other Wisconsin counties have incorporated a variety of evidence-based practices as outlined in the NCSC report, but these two are among those that have been recognized nationally.

Wisconsin has a proud tradition of improving the criminal justice system by letting good ideas flow from local leadership. Many of the programs in the report, for example, are the result of the efforts of criminal justice coordinating councils.

As we learn more about what works best, we will spread the word so courts throughout the state may take advantage of what's been learned without having to start from scratch. ■

OBITUARIES

Judge Patrick T. Sheedy Milwaukee County Circuit Court



Judge Patrick T. Sheedy

Former Milwaukee County Circuit Court Judge and State Bar President Patrick T. Sheedy passed away on Jan. 13 at the age of 90.

"Pat Sheedy was an officer and a gentleman," Supreme Court Chief Justice Shirley S. Abrahamson told the State Bar of Wisconsin in an article published after his death. "He could command a room with his dignified presence – a testament to his many years in the U.S. Army and the Judge Advocate General's Department. As Chief Judge in Milwaukee County, Pat was strong and decisive, but always

willing to listen to many diverse points of view. He recognized early on the value of information technology in the courts, both to improve efficiency and to ensure that the many disparate players in the justice system were communicating effectively. And above all, Judge Sheedy

never forgot that the courts exist to serve the public. The people who depend upon the courts to solve their disputes fairly and impartially always had Pat Sheedy in their corner. He will be dearly missed."

Sheedy served on the Milwaukee County bench from 1980-98. He served as chief judge from 1990-98. From 1943-46, he served in the U.S. Army in the U.S. and Far East. He was awarded the Legion of Merit and retired as a Colonel on the JAG Corps.

"Pat was a delightful colleague and a great chief judge," Supreme Court Justice David T. Prosser told the State Bar. "He was a furious defender of the interest of the independent judiciary."

While serving on the Milwaukee County bench, Sheedy played an important role reorganizing the court and reducing the felony calendar from 300 to 90 days. Milwaukee County Circuit Court Judge Christopher R. Foley also remembered Sheedy as a mentor during Foley's first few years in the circuit court.

"He always had time to listen and never rushed you," Foley told the State Bar. "He shepherded me through my