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Jailing delinquents isn't best response

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Leflore County Judge Kevin Adams should be commended for seeking ways to deal with juvenile delinquents other than locking them up.

Adams has opted to let Leflore County be one of three pilot sites in Mississippi participating in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. The initiative, which is designed to reduce the number of incarcerated children, is being spearheaded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The foundation is a well-respected charitable organization that has a mission of building better futures for this nation's disadvantaged children.

Presently, Adams says, his options are fairly limited when it comes to dealing with juvenile delinquents. He can lock them up, put them on probation or curfew, or order them to the Adolescent Offender Program at Life Help mental health center.

The judge is recruiting local leaders to help develop and implement other alternatives during the three-year trial run.

There is a growing awareness in the country, and it's slowly filtering into Mississippi, that incarceration is not cheap, nor is it particularly effective. That holds true for adults and juveniles alike.

Although public safety demands that violent criminals and incorrigibles be incarcerated, there are a lot of offenders who come out of lockup no better, and often worse, than when they went in.

There have to be better ways to turn around youthful offenders before it's too late.

We're not certain what all the alternatives might be. One that comes readily to mind, though, is community service.

There is a lot of work that could be done to improve the appearance of this community with young, able-bodied hands. Picking up trash along roadsides, sprucing up parks, painting weather-worn buildings, planting flowers and shrubs in public spaces, sweeping sidewalks, the list is endless. In the case where property crimes have been committed, ordering the offenders to make restitution to their victims by providing some free labor could be a valuable learning experience.

Of course, work crews require adult supervision, and that would cost some money. It can't be any more expensive, though, than what it costs to keep young people incarcerated.

Besides, the goal should be how best to steer a young person away from continuing down the wrong path. Instilling work habits and responsibility to others would do more in the way of rehabilitation than being isolated in a detention facility.

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