

The Reality-Based Community

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.

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24/7 Sobriety is Saving Lives in South Dakota: Why not everywhere else?

by Keith Humphreys

Mark and I have a [short piece in Newsweek](#) praising an innovative anti-drunk driving program in South Dakota, which has reduced road deaths and may also be reducing the prison population. You can learn more about the program from the [National Partnership on Alcohol Misuse and Crime](#); what I want to add here are the on-the-ground observations I made as I spent 3 days this week watching it in action.

For a criminal justice program, 24/7 Sobriety is remarkably respectful of offenders. I sat in one morning at a breath test station and watched dozens of people convicted of DUI come in, blow their breath test and then move along, each taking no more than a minute or two. The staff members were friendly, greeting each person by name and wishing each a good day. The building looked like a credit union. Because there were no uniformed officers, cell bars or guns visible, offenders with aversion to law enforcement would not have any instinctive ambivalence about coming in. The offenders also had some camaraderie among themselves, expressing pleasantries as they saw other offenders they knew in the testing station.

The atmosphere was, in short, completely different than what I had seen in the many correctional programs I have visited over my career. Antagonistic interactions with and degradation of people who have been convicted of crimes are not uncommon in corrections. This is bad in itself, and also generates rage and oppositional attitudes in offenders that may be expressed destructively at the time or later when they are no longer under supervision. 24/7 Sobriety has a completely different tone, and that's good for offenders and also for everyone else.

The visit also spurred some thoughts about the diffusion of innovation. Montana and North Dakota are launching their own 24/7 Sobriety pilots. London, England is interested also, and I will be visiting there soon to try to help. Each potential adopter will get the handbook of procedures, advice from the South Dakota experts, and the slick software that records all the tests and results, but what can't be given to them if they don't have it themselves are the intangible qualities that innovators bring to the table, and also the good fortune the South Dakota team had along the way that amplified the effects of their hard work. Those factors are part of the alchemy that determines whether a great local innovation goes to scale or stays a curiosity of a particular time and place.

Judge Larry Long, who created 24/7 Sobriety when he was Bennett County Prosecutor, is a remarkable person, although he would be the last one to say so. He did not commit

to a particular way of running the program and then try to ram it through as so many inventors do, regarding their innovation as a perfect child who deserves to be loved as is. Rather, as he described it to me, he started it on the assumption that it would encounter barriers (which it did) and he would simply keep changing it until it worked. And he supported the collection of data to see if it was effective, which too many people who create something new would never do.

The hand of fortune also dealt some good cards in South Dakota. Long had a good local context to start the program, namely some well-placed officials who were in recovery from alcoholism and understood what he was trying to do. Another benison that could not be guaranteed elsewhere is that Long was elected State Attorney General, which gave him a platform to endorse the program throughout South Dakota and not just in his own patch. But that still wouldn't have made it happen if he didn't have a skilled man on the ground. He got that in a state employee named Bill Mickelson, who as far as I could see knows every single person in South Dakota, from state legislators to the guy who works the desk at the hotel in Sioux City to the waitress at Wall Drug. Spreading innovations requires a network, and in Bill Mickelson's case it was a network established over decades that provided a basis to overcome inertia and skepticism. Not every program has both the high-level endorsement of political leaders (Long first, and now his successor AG Marty Jackely) and a skilled, hard working promoter to do all the legwork.

As I said, I am planning to help other sites attempt to launch 24/7, in collaboration with a loose confederation of colleagues around the country who think it could save thousands of lives and reduce incarceration levels at the same time. But for this to happen it will require manna from heaven in London and Montana and North Dakota in the form of unusually skilled local leadership, engaged politicians, and every break that Lady Luck can bestow.

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