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VIEWPOINTS

Paving the way for a fresh start

Diversion programs help low-level criminal offenders get their lives on track, **Faith Johnson** says

When the governor appointed me to serve as the Dallas County district attorney, one of my key initiatives was making criminal justice reform a priority. As the district attorney, it is my duty to put the bad guys away, but it is also my duty to do my part to make sure that justice is fair to all involved.

In 2016, the DA's office disposed of more than 50,000 cases. Many of those people received probation while hundreds of others were referred to one of our 14 diversion programs.

For the most part, people who are sent to these diversion programs have simply made mistakes, and we can help these low-level offenders get their lives back on track. The programs consist of a series of milestones, life skills counseling, drug treatment, or psychiatric treatment, based on individual needs.

Upon graduation from one of these programs, if they qualify, graduates can seek to have their records wiped clean, paving the way for fresh starts.

Through these programs, we also provide access to partners in the community who

can help secure necessities such as housing, employment and education. These partners are integral to success.

By creating partnerships with multiple community organizations, like the nonprofit Unlocking Doors, our office is able to take an active role in pooling resources, organizations and programs into one coordinated effort to help others help themselves.

There is no doubt that the state's ability to cross-network and collaborate with our community partners has been vital to the success of Dallas County diversion programs, and has become a model for diversion initiatives across the nation.

We are constantly asked by low-level offenders for the opportunity to set their records straight. Providing them a path to do so makes sense, because studies show that it will enhance their ability to obtain meaningful employment, which in turn reduces their prospects of becoming repeat offenders.

The process to get a case dismissed requires guidance. However, providing that guidance is a task I set out to achieve when taking the oath

of office as district attorney.

I partnered with other county and city leaders to host Dallas County's first Expunction Expo, a clinic to help clear cases that qualified for dismissal under the law. More than 1,000 people attended. Those people who were acquitted or pardoned or had their cases dismissed can now apply for jobs or housing without the stain of an offense hindering their success.

What we did with the Expunction Expo and what we continue to do through our diversion programs is to give people who deserve it a second chance. While I may have a reputation for being tough on crime, I am also compassionate.

My commitment as district attorney is to make a difference in the lives of our citizens. I believe that partnering with organizations to help build bridges into our communities will have positive results for years to come.



Faith Johnson is the Dallas County district attorney. Twitter: @DallasCountyDAO