



# DANE COUNTY

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## **Investing in Fairness and Equality**

*Column By: Dane County Executive Joe Parisi*

When I took office as Dane County Executive this past April it was a priority for me to continue the work I started in the state legislature as the chair of the Assembly Committee on Corrections and the Courts to address racial disparities in our criminal justice system. In this role, I saw first hand the impact policies have on first offenders and their likelihood to reoffend upon re-entry. The causes of these first offenses, and the challenges of re-entry into society once released from prison or jail, are a focus of the initiatives I introduced in the 2012 Dane County budget.

Two of these proposals were the result of a collaboration between myself and Dane County District Attorney Ishmael Ozanne. DA Ozanne shared my concerns that young African American male offenders are less likely to take advantage of deferred prosecution agreements that allow defendants to avoid jail time by serving their sentence in the community. A possible contributor to this trend has been identified – a general distrust of the system.

To address this growing trend, and to help defendants make choices that will help them succeed in re-entry and prevent reoffending, DA Ozanne and I took steps to implement culturally relevant counseling through a new partnership in this year's budget. The hope is that after defendants hear from individuals who share their experiences and background, they will be more likely to make the right choice.

The DA also expressed concern about the number of indigent defendants unable to take advantage of the drug testing offered by the county's Drug Court program. The budget makes \$10,000 in new money available to the DA to fund drug testing that will help keep these defendants out of jail.

Part of the solution to racial disparities also lies in helping youth stay out of the criminal justice system altogether. My budget addresses this goal in two ways – the first is a new partnership called the "Life Skills and Training Initiative." This proposal provides Operation Fresh Start, a proven program that helps at-risk youth gain the skills they need to land and keep a job, with funding to hire an additional 15 slot work crew.

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This initiative links important community partners who provide services to youth and who can help identify young people who would benefit from learning these skills. The Urban League, Boys and Girls Club and Centro Hispano will each help place young people in this new work crew.

The 2012 budget I signed into law includes a new “Court Diversion Unit” or CDU as well to reduce the number of kids who come into contact with the juvenile justice system and keep eligible youth from entering the system in the first place.

Under my initiative, staff in this new unit will complete an assessment of all new delinquency referrals from law enforcement and provide the District Attorney’s Office with a recommendation before the DA makes a decision on whether to file a delinquency petition, or whether to allow the Department of Human Services to enter into a deferred prosecution agreement. I am optimistic that this change in the process will decrease the number of formal petitions filed against youth and increase the number of youth deferred from court. The county’s Neighborhood Intervention Program will also play a significant roll in bolstering services that the county provides to help youth avoid formal prosecution, and enrich their lives.

A recently completed assessment of Dane County’s criminal justice system offers further opportunities for other reforms that will not only make the system more efficient, but also address our ongoing pursuit of fairness and equality.

Working together, we can achieve the changes needed to reduce the number of minority offenders in Dane County’s criminal justice system while at the same time ensuring public safety.