

Co-chairs Lieber and Kropf, and members of the committee,

My name is Tristen Edwards and I am a public defender at MPD. When I started at the office in 2017, I was first assigned to the Treatment First docket. Treatment First was an innovation of the District Attorney that intended to connect individuals struggling with substance use disorder to drug treatment, through the prosecution of low-level possession charges. Individuals entering the Treatment First program pled onto probation with a treatment requirement. There were two critical flaws with this approach:

One, jail is rarely a motivator for individuals struggling with addiction. A probation officer's reliance on punitive sanctions and their ability to incarcerate someone who admits to use, creates an enormous barrier to trust, which is a prerequisite to effectively engaging vulnerable populations.

The second major flaw in the Treatment First model was it didn't have any impact on the deficit of treatment services in Multnomah County. A requirement to do treatment is meaningless if the resource does not exist.

The most intensive version of a Treatment First plea deal was entry into STOP court. But between 2015 and 2021, STOP witnessed an overall graduation rate of only 17%. Though Treatment First was intended to connect people with treatment, it effectively led to longer jail sentences as revocations often led to 30-60 days in jail, when previously the standard plea offer was 10 days. Today, the opposition is proposing we go back to this failed approach.

Treatment First and STOP Court were in operation when the voters decided ballot measure 110. The decision to decriminalize drugs was in part a reflection of the criminal legal system's inability to address addiction, as evidenced by Treatment First.

To build effective pathways out of addiction we need to create opportunities for individuals suffering from substance use disorder to engage in trust-based relationships, like those formed with case managers and outreach workers, and we need a dramatic increase in treatment services.

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