

Lowering bonds for non-violent offenders timely, compassionate

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Over the next month, some people accused of non-violent, minor crimes in Boulder County are going to face a much different criminal justice landscape than the one they do now.

Boulder County Chief Judge Roxanne Bailin, with support from the district attorney's office and the sheriff's department, will roll out a new bond schedule for some suspects.

The reason: The system allows people accused crimes such as having a false identification card, or of check fraud, to pay \$1,500 to \$2,500 to leave jail. Those who can't afford the cost stay in jail. The system was designed to make sure people show up to court and don't commit crimes in the meantime.

But research shows the bonds do not impact those actions. And the result is that people with means leave jail, and the ones without it stay there, filling up the jail at taxpayer expense with low-level, non-violent offenders. They are there for this alone: They don't have as much money as those who could afford to leave. The current system is overly punitive to the poor -- who are disproportionately minorities. And since the crimes under discussion are so minor, those convicted are often let out of jail as soon as they are tried.

The Camera applauds this smart and thoughtful change.

Most of the proposed changes will lower bonds that are in the thousands of dollars to \$250. A supervision program will determine a person's risk, placing suspects on a low level or high level of supervision. Supervision could mean anything from phone calls to remind defendants of their court dates to electronic monitoring of drugs or alcohol use.

The Pre-Trial Justice Institute took a close look at money bonds and their impact on the justice system. The report states: "The use of money alone at bail has never been shown to increase public safety or to reduce the risk of a defendant not showing up for court. It has only ever been shown to increase pretrial incarceration."

Being in jail -- before trial, while one is still presumed innocent -- can lead to job loss and even the loss of one's home. It puts tremendous stress on the families and children of those accused. Patients can lose their Medicaid coverage.

The most basic conditions of parole -- to have a job and a place to live -- are sometimes thwarted by the mere fact that a defendant couldn't afford his or her bond.

As judge Bailin puts it, the change isn't just highly pragmatic, and supported by research, it's compassionate: "What kind of community do we want to be?"

We can be grateful that we live in a community that thinks about the more vulnerable among us -- even those who stand accused of a crime. Helping those suspects get back on their feet in short order is something that can benefit us all.

-- Erika Stutzman, for

the Camera editorial board

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