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GAZETTE OPINION

# Gazette opinion: Curbing Billings' street crime crisis

May 13, 2018

SALE! SIGN UP AND GET 90% OFF



Police, fire and ambulance personnel transport a man passed out in front of the Holiday station at Sixth Avenue North and North 27th Street on April 23. Later that morning, an elderly transient stabbed a woman shopping across the street at Albertsons.

LARRY MAYER, BILLINGS GAZETTE

The Motivated Addictions Alternate Program started working three years ago to get adults who were habitually intoxicated in public and frequently accessing emergency care off the streets of Billings and into treatment.

MAAP worked! Billings Downtown police officers teamed up with an outreach worker supported by Rimrock Foundation and the Community Crisis Center. Downtown Billings provided funding. Of the 74 people identified in a 2014 study as accounting for \$8.5 million in emergency costs because of hundreds of ambulance calls and repeat violations of open container, trespass and public urination prohibitions, many went into treatment in 2015 and 2016. Some got jobs. Not all were homeless to start, but just about all of them moved off the streets.

Now there's a new crowd in town and the street population appears to be growing.

- The Community Crisis Center was full to capacity virtually every night this winter, usually with a dozen or more people still waiting for an overnight bed.
- The Mental Health Center's HUB drop-in center has seen a surge in guests, recently logging 160 per day.
- The Montana Rescue Mission sheltered 187 "unique Code Blue individuals" this winter, according to community relations director Denise Smith. That was 187

adults whose intoxication usually would have disqualified them from overnight admission, except that the temperature was below freezing, so they were offered beds in the chapel.

Meanwhile in 2017, Billings police issued 2,013 trespass citations and 756 open container citations — both numbers are increases over 2016. Calls for police service increased by 9,823 last year citywide.

## No room in jail

The MAAP program is still running, and the three-person, police-treatment team is doing good work. But their efforts are limited because an essential tool for the program has disappeared. No longer can the MAAP team — or the Billings Municipal Court — tell repeat offenders that they will be jailed if they persist in breaking the law and refusing addiction treatment. There is usually no room in the Yellowstone County jail for someone who has been arrested five times or more for drinking alcohol on the streets, or trespassing on posted private property or urinating in public. Some offenders agree to treatment, but others need the stay-out-of-jail motivation.

When The Gazette asked law enforcement, treatment and human service professionals what is most needed to address the street crime problem, they all pointed to lack of the jail option that has reduced the MAAP program's effectiveness.

This city must provide the tools needed to maintain safe and inviting streets. We absolutely aren't advocating to lock up more people. This is a plea to reserve a few county jail slots for BPD and Municipal Court to use judiciously to motivate serial inebriates to help themselves with effective substance abuse treatment.

Making even a couple of beds available in our overcrowded county jail won't be easy. The jail expansion and renovation under way will increase capacity for housing female inmates by year's end, but it won't add cell space for male inmates. Yet the MAAP needs to be supported. We call on Sheriff Mike Linder, Police Chief Rich St. John, Municipal Judge Sheila Kolar and all the Yellowstone County judges to work together — as they have on other jail challenges — to find a way to restore the jail component of MAAP.

## Restore treatment court

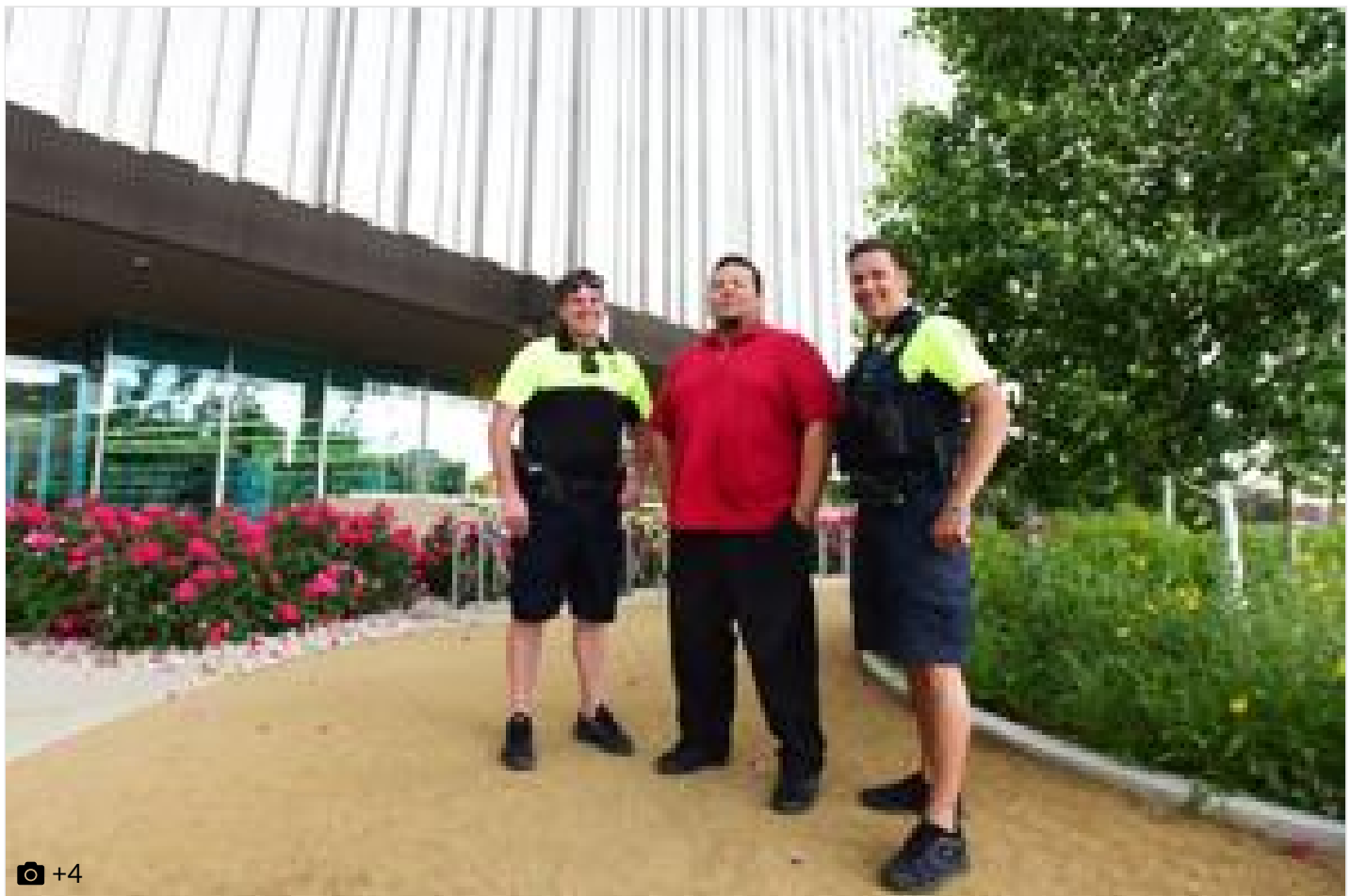
One obvious idea for making room in the jail is to bring back the Municipal Drug Treatment Court. Gazette readers will recall that the 2017 Legislature refused to continue funding for this highly successful treatment court, which was probably the largest and longest-running treatment court in the state. One of the benefits of drug treatment courts is that they get offenders out of jail, hold them accountable for sobriety and staying employed, and ultimately, reduce jail days and other public costs.

The Municipal Drug Treatment Court was phased out last summer and fall for lack of state funding. The Billings City Council should correct that legislative mistake. The council has started 2019 budget hearings and will discuss the Municipal Court budget in a meeting that starts at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday in the council chambers, which doubles as the municipal courtroom weekdays.

The council usually is loath to increase spending for anything, especially in a general fund department, such as Municipal Court. But the treatment court is about making government more effective, not bigger. Municipal Court is a significant revenue source for the general fund. We urge the council to consider putting some of those fine revenues to work against the root cause of so much crime in our community: substance abuse.

While city government must address street crime, addiction and homelessness, private sector initiatives are just as critical. Monday's Gazette opinion will examine how Billings charities are planning to better serve homeless and transient folks.

## MORE INFORMATION



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New outreach coordinator aims to curb the number of serial inebriates in downtown Billings

- Gazette opinion: Billings partnership yields sobering success
- San Diego mentors impressed by Billings' successful addiction alternative program
- Billings City Council approves second outreach coordinator
- Downtown seeing results with serial inebriate initiative
- Guest opinion: Hope for homeless in Billings

- Gazette opinion: State Medicaid cutbacks challenge family drug court
- Gazette opinion: Make room for MAAP to work again in Billings
- Gazette opinion: Keep murder rare in Billings
- Guest opinion: Speak up now for Hub, Community Crisis Center
- Gazette opinion: County needs Hub, Crisis Center
- Guest opinion: Hub builds trusting relationships with homeless, mentally ill people