

From court fight to caring

By A Times Editorial

Published February 2, 2007

Good intentions, goodwill and a sense of cooperation can do wonders. Florida's new secretary of the Department of Children and Families, Bob Butterworth, has demonstrated that by handling the controversy over mentally ill jail inmates in a way that puts state resources into helping people rather than into protracted court battles. The deal struck between DCF and the local public defender's office bodes well for the beleaguered agency and the vulnerable population it serves.

The situation with mentally incompetent inmates being kept in jail beyond the 15 days allowed by law had reach a crisis level. Under Lucy Hadi, DCF's previous head, there were hundreds of mentally ill inmates being held in local jails for months beyond the legal limit. Some ended up hurting themselves due to lack of proper treatment.

Pinellas-Pasco Public Defender Bob Dillinger had been heroically trying to get the courts to enforce the law, but an intransigent DCF fought back claiming a lack of funds. After a frustrated judge fined Hadi \$80,000 and threatened her with jail for noncompliance, wheels started turning and money for additional treatment beds started to be found.

But it took a new administration with a different attitude toward its social responsibilities for the focus to turn from legal battles to helping hands. When **Dillinger** and Butterworth just happened to cross paths a day before another DCF hearing on the issue, they worked out a settlement that would redirect the \$80,000 court fine into early intervention efforts.

Butterworth has promised to bring medical professionals into the Pinellas County Jail before the 15-day limit in order to try to stabilize these inmates. That means some of them would likely qualify for less restrictive community mental health placements, rather than the state's expensive and oversubscribed forensic hospitals. Butterworth plans to use the money saved from \$300-per-day hospital stays to continue the program and possibly expand it to the rest of the state.

It appears that **Dillinger** finally has a partner in state government. Butterworth says that Gov. Charlie Crist is serious about DCF meeting its responsibilities toward Florida's most vulnerable residents. This is a good start. It is amazing what a little goodwill can do.