

Random drug testing becomes absurd

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Marty Trilhaase

Since commercial truck drivers and Asotin County Family Aquatic Center employees submit to random drug testing, county commissioners say some of Asotin County Sheriff Ken Bancroft's employees should as well.

"I will continue in my opposition to any random urinalysis of any member of the Asotin County Sheriff's Office," Bancroft has written. "The fact is, random urinalysis is an illegal search."

The sheriff's wrong about that. Where it involves safeguarding the public, the courts have permitted random drug testing.

An officer with a drinking problem isn't all that unusual. Neither is the one who gets hurt badly on the job and develops a dependence on prescription pain-killers.

There's also reason to suspect some police in this country think steroids enable them to bulk up, perhaps to more effectively manage otherwise unruly members of society. But a person wearing a badge in the throes of steroids' side effects - extreme aggressiveness and irritability - can be a threat to ordinary citizens.

The question is not whether to drug test, but how.

Most police undergo pre-screening drug testing as a condition of employment.

Like Asotin County, however, Nez Perce County, Whitman County, Latah County, the Idaho State Police and Washington State Patrol don't engage in randomly drug testing their officers.

Ask a law enforcement veteran why and he'll tell you random testing is not cost-effective. Running through even a third of a staff of 100 people in a year or two won't be cheap.

How many do you test? How often? How do you select the people to be tested?

Preserving a chain of evidence requires someone to witness the subject urinating into a cup. Records have to be maintained. To guard against false-positive results, follow-up tests must be arranged.

Many illicit drugs leave the body at a rapid rate. Detecting residues means lining up even more sophisticated equipment.

What does all this yield? Apparently, not enough to justify the hit on the budget.

Far more effective as a drug test is an engaged boss, someone astute enough to spot the guy showing up for work either intoxicated or hung over. You need the kind of boss who doesn't ignore workplace accidents or altercations, but instead investigates them and recognizes when it's time to order the people involved to undergo drug testing.

Since there are better options to protect public safety, Asotin County commissioners are looking at this from the wrong angle. There's little reason to require a law enforcement officer to be randomly tested for substance abuse. Inflicting that same policy on people who work at a swimming pool seems even more absurd. - M.T.