

Letter of the day: In abuse case, justice should first be served for the abused

Last update: June 6, 2009 - 6:52 PM Star Tribune

A May 31 Star Tribune article, "Justice is unequal in sex abuse," suggests that prison sentences, rather than probationary sentences, in intrafamilial sexual abuse cases would signify greater justice for victims. In some cases, that may be true. But in other cases, it isn't. And that's why the Legislature allows for judges to diverge from the guideline sentences when in the "best interest of the victim or family." For more than 15 years, WATCH, a court-monitoring organization in Hennepin County, has observed sexual assault hearings involving children as victims. It is heartbreaking to see 10-year-olds on the witness stand in front of their abuser when they should be running on the playground with their peers. Although they shouldn't, many child witnesses feel the burden of their testimony -- that it may be the reason a family member goes to prison. That's not to say that the cases shouldn't go to trial or that defendants shouldn't serve prison sentences. But if some are required to spend time in the workhouse and undergo treatment instead of going to prison, it does not mean that justice hasn't been served. But we could do better. Justice could be better served if children were provided with services to help them deal with the effects of the abuse so they don't carry into adulthood their shame, fear and anger. Justice would be better served if society gave child victims and their families sufficient resources to overcome the psychological and emotional harm that has been done to them. Perhaps abusers could foot the bill.

MARNA ANDERSON, MINNEAPOLIS; EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WATCH