

Now Is the Time for Real Prison Reform

I begin by commending The Harrisburg Patriot-News and reporter Donald Guilliland for the excellent continuing coverage of the mass incarceration movement in Pennsylvania. The most recent installment focused on Secretary Wetzel's appearance before the House Appropriations Committee and the Department of Corrections [DOC] annual request for increased funding. In 1980 the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections budget was 200 million dollars and the population was 8,000 inmates in 8 institutions. Last week's request was for an additional 77 million bringing the overall budget to 2.2 billion dollars. We now house 52,000 inmates in 27 facilities. Does anyone really believe there are over 6 times as many bad guys as there were in 1980? Crime statistics suggest otherwise as property crime has slightly increased while violent crime has slightly decreased. Overall Commonwealth population has also slightly increased but none of these facts justify the dramatic rise in DOC budget and population.

"You say you want change, but you keep passing the same bills," A clearly frustrated Wetzel told the lawmakers.



Secretary of Corrections John Wetzel *JOHN C. WHITEHEAD, The Patriot-News*

Since adopting the prison reform legislation aimed at reducing the prison population, he said, the House has passed no fewer than 23 bills that will likely increase it - either through the creation of new criminal offenses, or lengthening the sentences for existing crimes.

Perhaps the General Assembly should look in the mirror if they want to know why Corrections budgets keep exploding. Since 2005 four major prison reform efforts have been undertaken by the General Assembly. State Senator Stewart Greenleaf has spearheaded each effort. The results have been minimal at best. The State Intermediate Punishment Act, the Risk Recidivism Reduction Act and the Justice Reinvestment Act all started with the best of intentions and contained many good ideas that would save

taxpayer money while maintaining public safety. The bills borrowed ideas that have been successful in other states. Each time the final product had been substantially weakened to make their impact almost meaningless. A soup sandwich was how one District Attorney who worked on the legislation described the final product. All the DOC can say is but for these laws, population increases would have gone through the roof and another costly round of prison construction would be in the offing.

What happened to these bills? Sadly the powerful District Attorneys Association and their partner, the Office of Victim Advocacy convinced the legislators to narrow the criteria for admission to programs that reduce the eligible population to the point where virtually no one can gain entry for the rapid release programs. The DA's also insisted on veto power over the programs. In the most recent Justice Reinvestment law, the DA's Association insisted on amending the bill to eliminate the prerelease program because an inmate on prerelease killed a Philadelphia Police Officer. While everyone mourns for the tragic death, anecdotal politics is how we got into this mess. The sins of one person should not result in everyone paying the price. Their mantra is that there is no price too high to pay for public safety.

I beg to differ. We live in a finite world with finite resources. This is especially true after the Great Recession of 2008 and tight budgets. Governor Corbett's last few budgets have cut dramatically into higher education, basic K-12 education funding, health care, general assistance for the poor and many other worthy programs yet Corrections keeps growing.

The Pennsylvania Prison Society, the nation's oldest prison reform organization believes we can chart a better course as many other states have done. For the past three years, the national prison population has declined. It is time for Pennsylvania to get on board and get serious about real sentencing reform. The War of Drugs has to be recognized as a failure. Incarceration of the mentally ill has to stop. Mandatory sentences should be repealed and discretion returned to the sentencing judges where it belongs. Marijuana laws need to be reexamined. The price of inaction is too steep as we see our schools falling apart, the cost of higher education driving families out of the middle class and our infrastructure falling apart. Now is the time to act.