

# Want to save money, Gov.-elect Wolf? You can start by trimming prison costs: Angus Love and Ann Schwartzman



**By Angus Love and Ann Schwartzman**

The great French novelist, Victor Hugo, once observed that "to open a school is to close a prison."

Gov.- elect Tom Wolf's campaign promised to replace the funding cut in education by Gov. Tom Corbett. He should heed Hugo's words in his quest for more school funding and balancing a budget with a predicted \$2 billion deficit.

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has been the single largest growth area of the Commonwealth budget for many years perhaps decades.

It is time to rein it in as other states and the country have done without compromising public safety. It is one area where a bi-partisan consensus can be reached and money can be saved.

Since 1980, the Corrections Department's budget has grown by over 1000 percent from \$94 million to more than \$2 billion.

The population has also grown by more than 600 percent from 8,000 to over 54,000 inmates as the number of prisons has grown from 9 institutions to 28 institutions.

**Since 1980, the Corrections Department's budget has grown by over 1000 percent from \$94 million to more than \$2 billion.**

Crime rates have remained fairly stable during this period of growth. Homicides have actually decreased. New York and Texas have reduced their prison populations, closed prisons and seen the crime rates drop.

The country as a whole has seen a drop in prison populations for three consecutive years with no spike in crime. It's time for Pennsylvania to give it a try.

Pennsylvania joined the prison expansion boom now referred to as mass incarceration, about three decades ago.

Mandatory sentences and the war on drugs were major factors in the increased use of prisons to address social ills.

Mental illness, drug addiction, and alcoholism were moved from public health concerns to criminal matters. As Attorney General Eric Holder recently observed, "Mass incarceration doesn't work and is no longer affordable."

This is not a Republican or Democratic idea. Conservative columnist George Will also recently observed;

"Over-criminalization has become a national plague. And when more and more behaviors are criminalized, there are more and more occasions for police, who embody

the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, and who fully participate in humanity's flaws, to make mistakes.

"The scandal of mass incarceration is partly produced by the frivolity of the political class, which uses the multiplication of criminal offenses as a form of moral exhibitionism," he wrote.

Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Stewart Greenleaf, R-Montgomery, has led the movement to rein in mass incarceration in the state.

He has offered several legislative initiatives on prison reform. Unfortunately, all were compromised during the legislative process and failed to deliver the promised intent.

A tough-on-crime attitude still prevails in Harrisburg and several amendments adopted weakened the results.

The most recent effort, the Justice Reinvestment Act signed into law by Gov. Tom Corbett in October 2012 failed to deliver the population reduction of 600 per year as advertised.

Since its passage over 2 years ago, Pa DOC population has been reduced by only 336 inmates, a fraction of the thousands of eligible men and women incarcerated across the state. Earlier efforts only stemmed the tide of growth and did not reduce prison populations.

Even the conservative Commonwealth Foundation is on board for reducing mass incarceration.

"The Commonwealth Foundation has long been **part of a trans partisan coalition** for corrections reform inspired by former Democratic Gov. George M. Leader, and we continue to stand with Gov. Corbett, Sec. Wetzel, and the unanimous consent of the General Assembly in their efforts to provide criminal justice reform that reduces costs to taxpayers and reduces crime." the group wrote on its website.

Politics makes strange bedfellows: the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania has also voiced concerns about out of control corrections spending. "This is sensible legislation that balances community safety and addresses the needs of inmates," Hoover said.

"Warehousing people simply doesn't work and costs the taxpayers millions of dollars." ACLU-Pa. Legislative Director Andy Hoover said.

The Pennsylvania Prison Society, the nation's oldest prison reform organization wholeheartedly joins in the call for reduced corrections spending and a reexamination of who we are incarcerating and why.

The Pennsylvania Intuitional Law Project, the legal aid provider to over 100,000 institutionalized persons also joins in this effort.

As dollars are limited, deficits abound and new taxes are difficult to swallow, the Corrections budget offers Wolf an opportunity to fulfill his campaign promise and save money through meaningful sentencing reform without negative consequences.

The criteria for eligibility for the Risk Recidivism Reduction Incentive and the Intermediate Punishment Act should be greatly expanded, time off for successful participation should be increased, marijuana should be decriminalized and the prerelease program reestablished and broadened. The commutation and pardons process should be revitalized.

Mandatory sentences should be reexamined with safety valves installed that return sentencing discretion to the judiciary where it belongs. These reforms will save money that can be invested in education – a key factor in reducing recidivism and promoting public safety.

This is a win-win for the Wold and the taxpayers of Pennsylvania. Sensible prison reform will allow the new governor to fulfill his mandate and benefit the Commonwealth.

**Angus Love is the executive director of the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project and Ann Schwartzman is the executive director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society. They write from Philadelphia.**