

Momentum building for public safety reform in Oregon

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With about eight months to go until our next legislative session, Oregonians can feel the vice-grip of our multi-billion dollar deficit tightening. We are tired of the cuts. We are tired of crisis mode. We are really tired of having to choose

between funding our prisons and educating our children — and when K-12 class sizes grow right along with prisons, we've made those choices. Likewise, it's senseless when funding shortages back county law enforcement into a corner

— counties such as Josephine County, which has begun dismantling its sheriff's office and is cutting its road patrol hours in half.

That's why Partnership for Safety and Justice is happy to be able to share some good news: This imbalance in priorities and spending is being called into question. On May 14, Oregon got two major boosts towards a vital goal: reforming our public safety system to become more cost-efficient and effective. The first leg-up came directly from the desk of Gov. John Kitzhaber, who reconvened a new and expanded Commission on Public Safety, a bipartisan, inter-branch task force charged with figuring out ways to use Oregon's limited public safety dollars in a smart way. The second came from a national source: The Pew Public Safety Performance Project, which announced that it has decided to step in and provide crucial technical support to the commission's efforts.

These are major developments in a long-overdue process. Policy makers across the state are recognizing that we cannot delay a reexamination of our public safety policies, and that the corrections budget, which now exceeds \$1.4 billion, can no longer be allowed to siphon funding from other fundamental parts of the public safety system, such as law enforcement, drug and alcohol treatment, and victims' services. As the governor's office acknowledges, Oregon's last comprehensive review of our sentencing policies took place back in 1989, and since then, a lot has changed.

Mandatory minimum sentencing laws such as Ballot Measure 11, which severely limit judges' ability to create a sentence based on the specifics of a case and the impact on the victim, have caused Oregon's prison population to more than double in the past two decades. We are currently on a path to add 2,000 more prison beds in the next 10 years. Every dollar spent on a prison bed means one less dollar to spend somewhere else. Failure to change this trajectory now will mean even more cuts to our underfunded education and health care systems, and even less funding for programs that are proven to prevent people from entering the criminal justice system in the first place.

The governor recognized the need to slow this unsustainable growth in our corrections budget, when he created the first Commission on Public Safety in July 2011. The commission recommended a reform of the state's sentencing laws, and endorsed a strategy called "justice reinvestment," which would shift public safety resources to programs that research has shown can reduce crime and save money — such as addiction treatment, re-entry programs, and victims' services. The reconvened commission will continue to be led by Oregon Supreme Court Justice Paul DeMuniz and includes two Democratic and two Republican members of the Legislature, a representative for the Governor's office and a public member. The expanded list of members includes a district attorney, a trial judge, and representatives from community corrections, the Sheriff's Association and the Criminal Defense Lawyers Association.

Discussions around ways to rebalance Oregon's out-of-date public safety system have happened in the past, but this conversation is different. The Governor's Office, along with legislative leadership, is enthusiastically on board. A broad-based coalition of education, business, and criminal justice advocates who want to get Oregon's corrections spending back on track are also pushing for reforms. There's also the economic climate, which makes reform urgent and unavoidable. And finally, there's the fact that Oregon's efforts have attracted the attention of some very influential and

important national folks — the Pew Center on the States.

Pew has a proven track record of success in reforming correctional spending. Texas, Kentucky, and most recently, Georgia, have all benefited from Pew's technical assistance in their public safety reform efforts. Early last month, Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal signed a package of reforms into law that is estimated to save more than \$250 million over the next five years. Pew's selection of Oregon as a priority state is a tribute to the leadership of our policy makers, and demonstrates the faith that Pew has in our ability to make smart changes to our sentencing and corrections policies.

Pew's prowess for gathering data has already been a big help. They released polling that shows broad support among Oregonians for public safety reform — welcome news for anyone who wants to build safer, healthier communities in Oregon. The numbers show that voters would prefer to cut prison spending than cut K-12 education, health care services or higher education, or raise property or business taxes. And in what would seem to be a direct challenge to Measure 11, the polling found that 82 percent of voters support shorter sentences for prisoners if combined with a stronger parole and probation system, and that 77 percent support giving judges more say in cases that mandate a specific prison sentence. These results prove what reform advocates have long known to be true: When Oregonians are given accurate information, they choose smart public safety approaches. They want their tax dollars used wisely.

The news from Pew and the governor's office is a hopeful beginning to a long process of deliberation that will eventually equip the 2013 legislature with smart, well-researched guidelines for public safety reform. Momentum is building, and it's time to get excited and involved for the road ahead. If you care about education, health, and safety, you care about this. Talk to your legislator about being smart on public safety, and stay informed on the commission's progress. And meanwhile, celebrate! Congratulations are in order, Oregon. But it's up to all of us to turn this momentum into positive change.

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