

Will Oregon's counties make the right choices?

BY SHANNON WIGHT
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Last June, the Legislature passed House Bill 3194, a public safety reform package that made some changes to Oregon's criminal justice system. The goal of the bill was to reduce the size and cost of the state prison system and invest some of the money saved in local programs that reduce crime and violence. The law was designed to keep our prison

receiving nearly the same amount of money and may not think it worth the investment of time. But over the next two years, counties that put into play smart approaches to crime will be building the foundation for safer communities and future state funding, which should be much greater in subsequent years.

When it comes to building safe, healthy communities, most people have a shared understanding that there are many important pieces of the puzzle: local law enforcement, the courts, community corrections, victim services and re-entry programs, and front-end prevention efforts such as addiction treatment and mental health services. Prison beds, while needed at times, are the most expensive option and don't always provide the best outcome — for either the individuals involved or for the community at large.

Around the country, the process of slowing prison growth and investing in more local and less costly forms of accountability and crime prevention — which Oregon is doing through HB 3194 — is known as "justice reinvestment." Numerous states are currently implementing similar pieces of legislation, among them Texas, Georgia and Delaware.

Modest sentencing reforms are the backbone of the savings that will be achieved through HB 3194. The reforms include modifications to extend transitional leave from 30 days to 90 days. This is time a person spends near the end of a sentence in a halfway house or under intensive supervision that supports successful re-entry into the community. The reforms also allow for probation rather than prison sentences for certain driving while suspended, marijuana possession and delivery, and other drug and property offenses. The bulk of the decrease in prison

beds will come from application of the transitional leave changes. Bluntly put, the money not spent on opening future prison beds will be invested in local public safety approaches. The question for Oregon is: Will that money be invested in smart ways that permanently break off our love affair with prisons?

Justice reinvestment is providing an opportunity for Oregon to choose a smarter public safety path, one that relies less on costly and often ineffective prison beds and more on local interventions proven to work. While allowing counties to make these choices without guidelines may be respectful of individual county circumstances, it's also risky given that each county's individual success is critical for the state to reach that \$300 million of projected savings. For example, investing heavily in local jail beds isn't a forward-thinking replacement for growing our state prison system. Yes, we need the ability to provide jail sanctions, but without strengthening addiction and mental health treatment and re-entry services, we will not address the root causes and break the cycle of crime.

Oregon's public safety destiny is in the hands of our 36 counties. Keep your eyes on county commissioners and local public safety coordinating councils to ensure they prioritize prevention-oriented investments so that we not only realize the \$300 million of prison savings but also strengthen our communities.

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SAFETY and JUSTICE

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population at its current level for the next five years, preventing the need to build a new prison. These changes are projected to save the state over \$300 million in the next 10 years. Over the next two years, \$15 million will be invested into local approaches to public safety that will prevent more people from going to prison.

Here's the catch: To realize those savings, Oregon's 36 individual counties have to make the right choices about how to reshape their local public safety systems. Will counties build the infrastructure needed to put this funding to work? Or will counties miss an opportunity to create the vibrant communities we all want to live in?

Each county will receive a portion of \$15 million allocated for the 2013-2015 budget cycle. Those checks are just beginning to be sent out now. There are no strings attached to the initial two years of funding — that's so counties can develop plans that make the most sense for their individual needs.

Multnomah and Lane Counties engaged in extensive conversations and planning with folks involved in the public safety system. Other counties have not engaged in such a thoughtful process. Most won't be

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