

Public safety that makes sense, costs less and rebuilds lives

BY SHANNON WIGHT
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Oregon faced a public safety crisis in 2013: the state's prison population had grown at a rapid rate between 2012 and 2013. According to the Bureau of

Justice statistics, our prison population grew by 3.5 percent – the fifth highest rate in the country and more than three times faster than the national average.

Why were more people going to prison in Oregon? It wasn't

because we have more people committing crime – Oregon is ranked 40th out of all 50 states when it comes to the rate of violent crime. One culprit was Measure 57, the mandatory sentencing ballot measure that has pushed more people into prison and done little to actually improve public safety.

Facing the reality of those numbers and the imminent need to build a new prison in Oregon during the 2013 legislative session, Gov. Kitzhaber and Oregon lawmakers had to make a choice: they could continue sinking money into more prisons or they could make an investment to prevent future violence, support survivors of crime, and make our communities safer. Ultimately, our elected officials chose to prioritize safety and savings over more prison beds. When Gov. Kitzhaber signed the Justice Reinvestment Act (HB 3194), we averted the need to start building a new prison and will save the state an estimated \$300 million over the next five years. The act invested an initial \$15 million to fund more effective and less expensive methods to prevent crime and make our communities safe.

While the passage of this landmark legislation was an important step, it was

only the first in a multi-year process to rebalance how our state prioritizes spending, reduces crime and improves safety. The Justice Reinvestment Act's success will depend on our continued commitment to a new way of addressing public safety through dedicated resources that build an infrastructure of cost-effective programs that prevent crime before it occurs and keeps those convicted of crime from landing back in prison.

More recent prison forecasts have shown that the Justice Reinvestment Act has been effective in flatlining and even decreasing prison growth in the short term. But changing the state's public safety trajectory away from an overreliance on prisons to a strong public safety infrastructure at the local level will take time. Our leaders must continue to strongly invest in counties to develop innovative programs that prevent crime and reduce unnecessary use of expensive prisons. These essential and currently underfunded local programs include addiction and mental health treatment, victim services and re-entry support for people released from prisons and jails.

During the last biennium, the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission distributed the \$15 million in funds approved as part of the Justice Reinvestment Act to counties in order to implement needed services that will keep Oregon on target to avert future prison construction costs. The numbers we have seen so far show that Justice Reinvestment is working.

Increased investments in Oregon counties – rather than state prisons – puts people to work and helps hold those who commit crimes accountable and ensure their future success. It creates jobs in local programs that provide support and services to people convicted of crime and victims to allow them to rebuild their lives.

In Multnomah County, the Local Public Safety Coordinating Council is leading work that uses the Justice Reinvestment resources to do a thorough assessment of people facing prison terms and to determine if they can be held accountable more effectively through sanctions and services locally.

This is public safety that makes sense.

This is public safety that costs less.

This is public safety that rebuilds lives and invests in our communities.

But only if Gov. Kitzhaber and legislative leaders fulfill the commitment they made in 2013 with the Justice Reinvestment Act.

One promising sign is that the governor's budget recommended allocating \$58 million to support smarter public safety programs run by county governments. That amount is based on projections of what it would have cost to build a new prison in Junction City.

Unfortunately, the co-chairs of Ways and Means have already cut that funding to \$20 million. We won't know until June whether legislators will follow the governor's lead in making this critical investment.

Smarter public safety policy isn't rocket science – we have loads of evidence about the services and programs that prevent violence and reduce crime. And already Oregon counties are demonstrating that they can be successful with increased resources. But that evidence doesn't mean much unless we have legislative leaders with the vision and the guts to follow through with their commitment and do what works.

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Shannon Wight is the deputy director at Partnership for Safety and Justice. PSJ is a statewide, non-profit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and just.

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