

# Unified message for Oregon: Reinvest in justice

*Diverse interests come together to support the state's promising program for criminal justice reform*

**BY SHANNON WIGHT**  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

On May 14, Oregon's Office of Economic Analysis released its quarterly review of the state's economic health. Oregon is demonstrating strong economic growth, recovering from

the recession at a faster pace than the national economy. That is good news for most Oregonians (although rural counties aren't seeing the same rate of growth) and means there are more

general-fund dollars than originally expected to spend in the 2015-17 biennium.

On the same day the economic forecast was released, more than 50 people went to the Capitol to meet with legislators about the need for a continued investment in smarter public safety policy. Interests as diverse as the district attorneys and criminal defense lawyers reminded legislators that in 2013 Oregon chose a new public safety path: one that through sentencing reforms and local investments prevents the need to build a new prison in Oregon for at least 10 years. Business leaders, crime victim advocates, community corrections, sheriffs, county commissioners and advocacy organizations, including the Urban League of Portland, the League of Women Voters of Oregon and Partnership for Safety and Justice, joined to present a unified message that we must stay the course through needed investments to build a more effective and responsible justice system.

As we've written in this space before, the Justice Reinvestment Act has shown marked success in its first two years. Justice

Reinvestment in Oregon is a grant program administered by a small state agency, the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission. The CJC gives counties state funds to meet local public safety needs with the goal of reducing prison intakes, reducing crime victims and reducing recidivism. Each county has a local public safety coordinating council that identifies the needs of that county and, with formal approval from the county commission, funds programs, services and sanctions to meet those goals.

Since 2013, prison intakes are down by nearly 4 percent. Multnomah County has reached its targets by implementing a new screening process to assess who can be safely diverted from prison and held accountable locally while given services and support to be successful. New initiatives like the one in Multnomah County are projected to save the state over \$300 million. Investments in new programs and services that help reduce crime are anticipated to create even greater savings by reducing the need for additional prison beds and reducing future crime. This is public safety that makes sense and costs less.

There is real accountability for how Justice Reinvestment funds are spent — future legislatures will examine data on outcomes for reduced prison intakes, decreased recidivism and cost savings. In fact, 3 percent of the funds will be used to conduct random controlled trials on some of the programs to dig deeply into what's working and what's not.

Early indications are: It's working. Participants in Justice Reinvestment-funded programs have turned their lives around because of these new investments. More people are finally receiving drug treatment, combined with life-skills training and counseling that works. Justice Reinvestment is more than a grant program; it's an

approach to reducing crime that focuses on rebuilding the lives of people convicted of crime — and victims. Over the next two years, 10 percent of the funds will support crime victims in their efforts to rebuild their lives.

The May 14 revenue forecast put an additional \$274 million on the table for distribution by the 2015 Legislature. K-12 education is slated for \$105 million of that, and there are numerous other demands for increased funding.

While recognizing that tough choices will have to be made, Justice Reinvestment funding should be prioritized for full funding this session. This new way of doing public safety business in Oregon is just

getting on its feet, and without the proper investment, it could falter and send us back to wasting millions by opening a closed prison unit or having to build a new one.

Right now, there is a greater call for criminal justice reform than ever before. Even before the tragedies in Ferguson, Mo., New York, and elsewhere around the country, leaders from both major political parties were beginning to recognize the failed experiment that is mass incarceration. Oregon's model can work, but it takes meaningful upfront investments.

During the United for Justice event, Midge Purcell, director of policy and advocacy for the Urban League of Portland, told Peter Buckley, co-chair of the Committee on Ways and Means: "In my community, Justice Reinvestment means holding people accountable while keeping them closer to families and communities, keeping families together and keeping parents working at their jobs — those things make our communities safer. Now is the time to continue this work and make the needed investments to do so."

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Shannon Wight is the Deputy Director of Partnership for Safety and Justice. PSJ is a statewide, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and just.

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