

Path Away from Prisons

continued **▲** from front

ment rate has grown more than three times the rate of the national average in the last decade, locking up an estimated 14,000 inmates.

"What does that say about us as a people?" said Clariner Boston, executive director of Better People, a Portland non-profit whose mission is to reduce recidivism and help individuals with legal histories adapt back into the community.

With Oregon's Legislature now in session, the topic of debate has sparked a movement and new bills that consider the costs of sentencing—both in terms of money and human life.

Better People held a public educational forum on the issue last week at the Multnomah Public Defender's Office where a panel and Former Chief Justice Paul De Muniz, chair of the Public Safety Commission, discussed ways to implement changes in state sentencing laws.

Panelists included Multnomah, Clackamas and Marion county district attorneys and representatives of the city's Mental Health and Addiction Services and the Department of Community Justice.

Justice De Muniz opened with the matter-of-fact statement: "There is no money." A modern prison in Madras, Ore., which cost the state

\$120 million to build in 2008 and was meant to house 1,228 inmates, sits empty without funds to run it.

Oregon taxpayers now spend more than \$1.3 billion each biennium to pay for corrections, according to the commission's report. The state projects prisons to continue to grow, filling beds with mostly nonviolent offenders and costing taxpayers an extra \$600 million dollars.

Why are drugs so prevalent? Mental illness has become more of an issue every day. I wonder if we punish people if they have a problem by which they have very little control.

—Clariner Boston, executive director of Better People

Oregon offenders are also staying longer in prison today than they have ever in the last decade, said the report. Meanwhile resources for community corrections programs and treatment have shrunk.

Echoing recommendations from the commission's report, Justice De Muniz said, "We need reinvestment." On any given day, he said, "Of 14,000 prisoners, 46 percent,

nearly half, failed on probation or post-prison supervision."

Had the former inmates been enrolled in community corrections programs, the cost to supervise an individual would be \$12 a day as opposed to \$85 a day of incarceration.

Justice De Muniz cited a need for "robust re-entry programs" to decrease the recidivism rate across Oregon, save money, and "get a return on human capital."

haviors?" she said. "Why are drugs so prevalent? Mental illness has become more of an issue every day. I wonder if we punish people if they have a problem by which they have very little control."

Boston says many people enter the criminal justice system as inexperienced youth. When they should be learning skills and getting jobs, they are getting 5 to 10 years in jail, often for nonviolent crimes.

was sentenced to 70 months in jail for a crime he committed. He said, "His case is one of thousands we are paying for in long-term sentencing."

The attorney called for a return to discretionary sentencing, where a judge can decide to issue whatever sentence they believe fits the crime.

When asked how \$600 million of taxpayer's money could be better spent, panelist Jean Dentinger, Multnomah County diversion court manager, said she looked to community programs as a good alternative to incarceration.

Other panelists agreed that funding evidence-based programs, like Better People, will help people stay out of prison.

"We know that a large percentage of people that are incarcerated and released, return [to prison] within three years," said Boston.

Better People offers counseling and employment readiness programs for the formerly convicted. Other treatment programs focus on recovery, mental health, and housing.

Boston was studying for her Masters Degree in Business Administration when she got interested in criminology, particularly the statistics which show the disproportionate number of people in prison without means—minorities and people who are poor.

"It is not something you can turn your back on," said Boston. "It impacts you personally and your tax dollars."

"How is that serving the individual, their families or society in general?" said Boston. "When people are young they make poor decisions, but unfortunately those consequences follow them for the rest of their lives—in terms of housing, employment and even, socialization."

At the forum, a defense attorney spoke of a 15-year-old client who

Troubled by the statistics, and working on behalf of former inmates struggling to turn their lives around after prison, Boston argues harsher and lengthier sentencing do not always eradicate crime. She says that we need to look at the roots of the problems among those who commit crime instead of to punishment.

"What are the real problems that are supporting those kinds of be-

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EASTBANK
501 N. GRAHAM,
SUITE 525
PORTLAND, OR 97227
PHONE: (503) 249-5454

TABOR
5050 HOYT STREET,
SUITE 359
PORTLAND, OR 97213
PHONE: (503) 249-5454