

Long Mandatory Sentencing Reforms Coming

Obama official announces major shift in policies

(AP) — Attorney General Eric Holder announced a major shift Monday in federal sentencing policies, targeting long mandatory terms

that he said have flooded the nation's prisons with low-level drug offenders and diverted crime-fighting dollars that could be far better spent.

If Holder's policies are implemented aggressively, they could mark one of the most significant changes in the way the federal criminal justice system handles drug cases since the government declared a war

on drugs in the 1980s

As a first step, Holder has instructed federal prosecutors to stop charging many nonviolent drug defendants with offenses that carry mandatory minimum sentences. His next step will be working with a bipartisan group in Congress to give judges greater discretion in sentencing.

"We will start by fundamentally rethinking the notion of mandatory minimum sentences for drug-related crimes," Holder told the American Bar Association in San Francisco.

There are currently more than 219,000 federal inmates, and the prisons are operating at nearly 40 percent above capacity. Holder said the prison population "has grown at an astonishing rate — by almost 800 percent" since 1980. Almost half the inmates are serving time for drug-related crimes.

Holder said he also wants to divert people convicted of low-level offenses to drug treatment and community service programs and expand a prison program to allow for release of some elderly, non-violent offenders.

The speech drew widespread praise, including from some of the people Holder will need most — Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill. But support was not universal.

Still, the impact of Holder's initiative could be significant, said Marc

Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project, a private group involved in research and policy reform of the criminal justice system.

African-Americans and Hispanics probably would benefit the most from a change. African-Americans account for about 30 percent of federal drug convictions each year and Hispanics account for 40 percent, according to Mauer.

If state policymakers were to adopt similar policies, the impact of changes at the state level could be even broader.

Currently, about 225,000 state prisoners are incarcerated for drug offenses, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. One national survey from 15 years ago by the Sentencing Project found that 58 percent of state drug offenders had no history of violence or high-level drug dealing.

Holder said rising prison costs have resulted in reduced spending on law enforcement agents, prosecutors and prevention and intervention programs.

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Jean Malary, owner of Affordable Electric

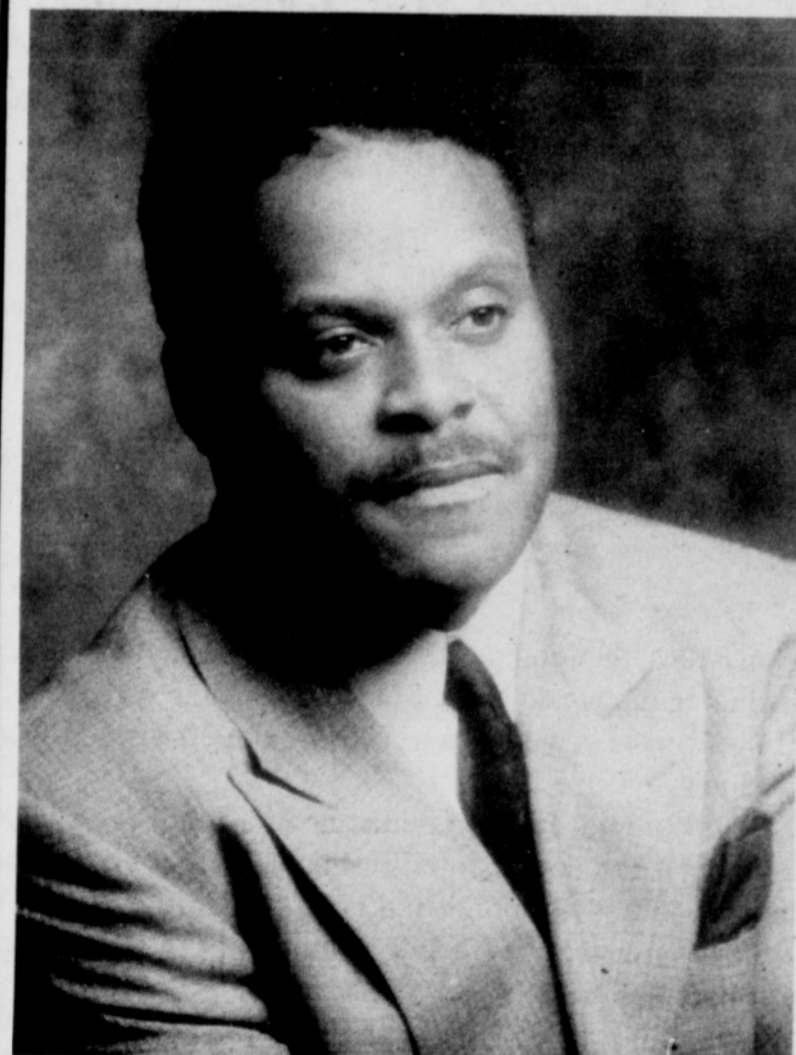
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U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder targets mandatory prison terms.

Strategy to Treat Offenders Found

Providing drug and alcohol treatment to all of the highest-risk offenders would have saved Oregon crime victims and tax payers an estimated \$21.6 million from 2008 to 2011, a new state audit has found.

Addressing the treatment needs of offenders is critical to reducing crime and other societal ills caused by substance abuse.

Currently, counties bear most of the cost of treating former prison inmates. Under the expansion of Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act, released offenders not previously eligible for Med-

icaid may qualify for treatment paid with 90 percent federal funds and 10 percent state funds.

"Substance abuse takes an enormous toll on our communities. This audit makes the connection between next year's expanded Medicaid coverage and county needs for more treatment funding," said Oregon Secretary of State Kate Brown. "Counties will save general funds, more released offenders will get treatment and our communities will avoid more of the costs and heartache of an offender's continued criminal involvement."