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Marc Levin: Texas parole reforms lowered crime, cost

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Public safety is job one, but recent improvements in Texas parole outcomes demonstrate that we can be safer while saving money.

In 2008, 1,016 fewer Texas parolees were alleged to have committed a new crime than in 2007. Net savings may exceed \$96 million. These gains continued in 2009, though scaling back parole supervision could reverse this progress.

Why are so many fewer parolees committing crimes? For starters, substance abuse treatment resumed in 2005. Prior to 2007, drug tests were sent to a laboratory, creating a delay of a few weeks. Now, results are instant and most parolees with a drug problem admit to it before being tested. Violators who do not pose a public safety risk are immediately referred to outpatient treatment.

Graduated sanctions such as curfews and increased reporting have been enhanced, ensuring a swift but commensurate response to each rule violation. Parolees who repeatedly violate the rules or commit a misdemeanor are often sent to an Intermediate Sanctions Facility for approximately 90 days, in lieu of being revoked to prison. Some parolees at these facilities receive drug treatment along with follow-up counseling upon release. Literacy, GED and workforce preparation programming are available at some facilities.

Parole officers have increasingly been oriented towards helping parolees succeed while some states are known for simply "trail'em, nail'em, and jail'em." Funding for parole chaplains was restored in 2007. Parole resource centers emphasize decision-making based on concern for others and the victim. Texas also has smaller caseloads than many states, ranging from 15 to 75.

Employed ex-offenders are far less likely to re-offend, and 65 percent of Texas parolees are working. In contrast, 80 percent of California parolees are unemployed. Job placement and training for parolees has been enhanced since 2007 through closer ties between parole offices and local workforce centers.

In Texas, parole is a privilege, not a right. Inmates demonstrate their commitment to change through good behavior and completion of work, education and treatment programs. Each case is reviewed based on individualized factors and the severity of the offense.

Furthermore, the most dangerous Texas sex offenders are ineligible for parole. The most seriously violent inmates serve 87.5 percent of their sentences, with serious sex offenders serving 97.5 percent. Yet two-thirds of offenders enter prison for a nonviolent offense.

Prosecutors recognize the value of strong parole policies. The National District Attorneys Association notes that low-risk offenders can be released without jeopardizing public safety if they are properly supervised. Without parole, they would subsequently be released without any supervision.

While the primary benefit of reducing crime by parolees is the averted human and economic toll on victims, preventing crime also saves money. Incarcerating an additional 1,016 parolees would have cost \$20.8 million. Moreover, building 1,582 prison beds would have cost \$76.2 million.

Prison costs 13 times more than parole, but if supervision, treatment, workforce development and chaplaincy for parolees are scaled back, more parolees may commit new crimes and be revoked to prison. The result: more crime and higher costs to taxpayers.

Instead, we must continue to break the cycle of crime. Since prisons consume 85 percent of the corrections budget, the best way to save money is to prevent crime so fewer lockups are needed.

Texas remains tough, but is also smart on crime. As policymakers face budget pressures, they must remember that a strong parole system is vital for public safety and taxpayers.

Marc A. Levin is the director of the Center for Effective Justice at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit, free-market research institute based in Austin. His e-mail address is mlevin@texaspolicy.com.