



## Georgia prison reforms clearly needed

By John Roberts

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The Atlanta Friends Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, more commonly known as Quakers, are heartened by Gov. Nathan Deal's recent remarks on prison reform. Deal is demonstrating leadership on an issue that is gaining rapid nonpartisan momentum across the country.

As a nation, we have 5 percent of the world's population but nearly 25 percent of the world's reported prisoners. In the words of Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., "Either we are home to the most evil people on earth or we are doing something different, and vastly counterproductive."

Georgia has an urgent need for criminal justice reforms, as we have the highest rate of incarceration in the country. Deal informs us that one out of every 13 Georgia residents is under some form of correctional control; this is more than twice the national rate.

Opening Georgia criminal justice to enlightened reforms is smart, fair and cost-effective. Deal has proposed alternatives to prison for nonviolent offenders, including day-reporting centers, drug and mental health courts and intensive probation.

Today, a first-time minor offender who might benefit from rehabilitation is placed in the same environment with child molesters, rapists and murderers, where it is impossible to safeguard the nonviolent from the violent. In the words of Georgia Chief Justice Carol Hunstein, "If we can address these defendants, especially low-risk defendants, in a way that keeps the community safe or safer, I think that is the way to proceed."

Other states introducing sweeping criminal justice reforms include South Carolina and Texas. In a recent AJC article, Marc Levin, director of the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Center for Effective Justice, noted, "Texas is a conservative state like Georgia. We aren't letting people off the hook. We are just holding them accountable in a different way."

According to Georgia Corrections Commissioner Brian Owens, six of every 10 inmates in Georgia prisons are there for sex offenses or violent crimes, leaving four of 10 who might be eligible for alternatives. These alternatives will tend to be more humane and will help keep families together. They will also provide help for the addicted and the mentally ill. Certainly reform will require careful coordination with counties, local court systems and other service providers. Quakers believe now is the time for Georgia to start the process, following other states who are realizing the benefits and savings of a new approach.

Since our founding in England in the late 1640s, Quakers have always looked for humane, innovative policies that help move us toward a better society. The terrible sufferings of early Quakers in the prisons of the 17th century have given us a special interest in the management of prisons and the treatment of crime. One of our founders, George Fox, protested to the judges of his day "concerning their putting men to death for cattle and

money and small matters,” and laid before them “what a hurtful thing it was that prisoners should lie so long in jail” showing how “they learned wickedness from one another in talking of their bad deeds.” Prison reform remains a core Quaker testimony.

Similar to our friends and neighbors, Quakers want to be free from violent crime in our streets and homes. But we realize that the current criminal justice system in Georgia is not working. As we see it, spending more than \$1 billion a year on the current state corrections system is not being tough-minded. Rather, it seems soft-minded — neither wise nor effective.

There has to be a better way, and we are grateful for the leadership of the new governor.

John Roberts is co-clerk of the Social Concerns Committee at Atlanta Friends Meeting in Decatur.

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