

Kris Steele leading courageous state prison reform effort

by: JULIE DELCOUR Associate Editor
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Years ago, former state Sen. Dick Wilkerson warned that Oklahomans needed to decide between "locking up criminals they were afraid of versus locking up criminals they were just mad at."

That line's been used many times by leaders hoping to convince the Legislature and public that the state's incarceration rate, way above the national average, is unsustainable, not to mention unrealistic.

When Oklahoma was relatively flush, nobody paid much attention - locking up all those offenders appeared worth the cost, although it didn't actually make the public all that much safer.

Then the recession struck in 2008. Revenues crashed and the reality sank in that wholesale incarceration, thought to be taking a bite out of crime, actually was taking a bigger bite - a mega bite - out of the funds needed to balance the budget and improve the state.

Where's the glory in being No. 3 in the nation in overall per-capita incarceration and No. 1 for incarceration of women when you're No. 48 in teacher pay?

Several state lawmakers, like many of their counterparts elsewhere, finally experienced an "aha" moment this session, realizing that Oklahoma no longer could afford for the Department of Corrections to rank as the second fastest growing part of state government behind health care. With prisons 99 percent full, where is DOC going to put more dangerous offenders?

They finally accepted that something must change in how Oklahoma punishes its nonviolent offenders.

Sea change

Last week, by a vote of 87-4, House members, Democrats and Republicans alike, passed a prison reform measure embraced by both fiscal conservatives and social reformers. House Bill 2131 still must get through the Senate but with a \$500 million state budget hole, the Senate needs to help make some changes in corrections or get off the pot.

Steele's bill would make strategic changes including limiting the governor's role in the parole process for nonviolent offenders. Oklahoma is the only state whose governor must sign off on every parole. This creates a logjam, costing the state huge amounts of money while parole applicants await a decision. With HB 2131, the governor still would decide paroles in cases involving certain violent crimes. But, in other cases the state Pardon and Parole Board's recommendation would go into effect if the governor didn't act after 30 days.

The bill also would expand eligibility for community sentencing - a huge step. For many nonviolent offenders, this is a cheaper and far more effective punishment and deterrent against recidivism than warehousing them in prison where they receive little treatment for drug addictions and little job training. In the community, they would be required to work and would receive treatment options.

The bill also calls for greater use of Global Positioning Systems to monitor more offenders - an option that is far less costly than spending \$18,000 a year to incarcerate an offender.

The man to thank

House Speaker Kris Steele is the man to thank for having the political courage to push through what generations of lawmakers avoided. Steele's surname is appropriate. He might just be the toughest man on crime in the state. Steele finally drove home the message that Oklahoma no longer can continue robbing Peter (education, health care, infrastructure, etc.) to pay Paul (prisons).

Sticking to that same old tired model is not deterring much crime nor causing the recidivism rate to exactly plummet.

Marc Levin of the Texas Public Policy Foundation and part of the Right on Crime initiative, noted recently, that Oklahoma has "a system that grows when it fails."

"Instead of pouring more money into the current corrections system, we need to restructure it to make sure taxpayers are getting the most for their money," he said

Steele is seeking input from experts like Levin. On the same day HB 2131 passed, Steele and others announced that the national conservative initiative, Right on Crime, would assist lawmakers on proposals to reduce the prison population. The initiative has been effective elsewhere.

In 2007, to avoid spending \$2 billion to build new prisons, the Texas Legislature adopted a \$241 million plan to expand alternate supervision and treatment programs. The state's crime rate is the lowest since 1973 and Texas has 7,000 fewer inmates than it might have had but for the changes.

All told, Texas, using the Right on Crime approach, has saved \$137 million.

Right on crime

The initiative advocates alternate sentencing for low-risk, nonviolent offenders, offenders taking responsibility for their behavior, more restitution for crime victims and performance-based review of corrections efforts,

HB 2131 is only the first step. Other issues keeping incarceration high also should be addressed. Lawmakers must figure out how to pay for more community programs. Reinvesting resources up-front in education, prevention and treatment services could lead to cost savings and better outcomes for offenders. Rehabilitation, through community sentencing, won't occur for every inmate but some could be helped to lead productive lives. That's not being soft on crime it's being smart about crime.

Corrections reform is hard work that takes steel in the spine. The public must be shown that Texas' success is not an anomaly - that Oklahoma can have success as well.

There are some crimes for which incarceration results in net social benefits. There are other crimes for which it is not an optimal choice. Maybe this will be the year that the Legislature finally considers about what the term corrections really means.

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Julie DeCour 918-581-8379

julie.delcour@tulsaworld.com

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