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## Editorial, 3/21: Save money on corrections

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Editorial, 3/21: Save money on corrections

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Polarization between conservatives and liberals seems to deepen with every passing year -- with one notable exception.

The two ends of the political spectrum are finding common ground on prison reform.

The conservative interest is driven primarily by a desire to save tax dollars. The Right on Crime reform group, noting that spending on corrections is the second-fastest growing area of spending after Medicaid, puts it this way in its statement of principles: "Conservatives correctly insist that government services be evaluated on whether they produce the best possible results at the lowest possible cost."

That principle was put into a Nebraska context in a policy study done for the conservative Platte Institute headquartered in Omaha. In a report released last month, authors Marc Levin and Vikrant Reddy reported that between 1995 and 2005, Nebraska's prison population grew by 34 percent. During the same period, spending on corrections nearly tripled from \$72 million to \$206 million.

"Locking up dangerous violent offenders for long periods, though costly, is undoubtedly a sound use of taxpayer's dollars," the report states. "The growth in Nebraska's prison population and costs, however, is largely the result of increased incarceration of nonviolent offenders for short periods of time."

The report suggests that the key question that should be asked by budget hawks and policymakers is "not how many people are in prison, but how much public safety and victim restitution is obtained for each dollar spent."

That's where conservatives and progressives find common ground. It turns out that for some offenders, particularly nonviolent drug offenders, there are more effective options than doing hard time in prison.

Some of those alternatives have been tried on a limited basis in Nebraska, but more can be done to

expand alternatives that are "consistent with the principles of limited government, fiscal responsibility and public safety that have proven successful in empirical research in and practice on a limited basis in Nebraska and in other states, such as Texas," according to the report.

Among the recommendations listed in the report are drug courts, which already operate in some parts of the state, a less-intensive type of drug court used in Hawaii called a HOPE court, performance-based probation funding, mandatory probation and treatment requirements for certain drug offenses, graduated sanctions for probation, mental health courts, geriatric parole and more electronic monitoring.

Last week, state senators heard heart-wrenching stories about how cuts in child care subsidies and similar programs carry the risk that children will get a poor start in life, making them more likely to end up in prison or on welfare rather than productive taxpayers.

That approach is shortsighted. The Platte Institute report points to a better option for cutting costs in state government. It should be required reading in the state Capitol.

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