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### 'Right on Crime' is right for Maryland

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Conservatives are known for being tough on crime, but in economic times like these, we must also be tough on criminal justice spending. Nationally, a number of conservative leaders have formed a "Right on Crime" coalition, which promotes creating a more cost-effective system that protects citizens and reforms law-breakers while still holding them accountable -- the goal being to turn people who are tax burdens into taxpayers.

In Maryland, several of us conservative state legislators are seeking to put these principles into action, through efforts that address a pressing need in our state: reducing the number of people on parole who end up back in our prisons and jails. Doing so will save the state millions of dollars and improve public safety at the same time.

Parole is the system that allows certain people to serve a portion of their sentence under the supervision of officers in the community. Parolees are required to stay out of trouble and follow rules known as "conditions," which include attending scheduled meetings with their assigned officer, undergoing drug or alcohol testing, and working regularly.

In our state, one out of four people who serves his or her full sentence in prison, and then is released without any supervision, ends up committing new offenses within a year. For those on parole, this number is less than one in 10 who commit new crimes.

While we have made improvements, the number of parolees going back to prison is still too high. In 2008 1,641 out of 7,984 (roughly one out of five) parolees returned to prison. Almost half were sent not because they received a new sentence, but for violating a condition of parole. With prison costing about \$35,000 per person per year, we need to reduce this failure rate. Maryland taxpayers shouldn't have to tolerate spending over \$1 billion annually on a public safety system that resembles a revolving door for criminals.

One bill I introduced this year, the "Swift and Certain Sanctions Act," creates a clear, measured way that people can be held accountable for rule violations that don't pose a public safety risk. The legislation includes processes more likely to lead individuals to getting back on the right track rather than an expensive trip back to prison.

Too often parolees ignore the rules and are often not punished for violating them. This legislation changes that by putting in place a system of graduated sanctions for technical violations of parole. So the next time someone misses an appointment with their parole officer or fails a drug test they will face real punishments like a weekend in jail or home detention -- with the hope being that they get the message and straighten up before their parole is revoked and they are sent back to jail for a number of years. Texas recently introduced similar reforms, saved \$2 billion, and reduced the crime rate to the lowest level since 1973.

The legislation also requires that the state monitor the amount of taxpayer dollars invested in programs that are proven to reduce recidivism. The goals are that the state spend money on programs that help keep individuals from coming back to jail and cut funding for programs that do not work. This legislation passed both the Maryland House and Senate unanimously last session and was signed into law by Gov. Martin O'Malley.

If statewide we can keep 40 percent more people safely and successfully on parole rather than having them end up back in jail for a year or more, our state would save close to \$15 million per year. In terms of public safety, a study of an earlier Maryland pilot program showed that people who are properly supervised and receive appropriate re-entry services were more than 38 percent less likely to be arrested for new criminal behavior than those on "business as usual" style parole.

The Swift and Certain Sanctions Act was only a small step in fixing Maryland's criminal justice system. Efforts that decrease crime and more effectively spend taxpayer dollars are a step toward a safer and more fiscally responsible Maryland, which is something all of us -- conservative, liberal or anywhere in between -- can and should support.

Delegate Michael J. Hough represents Frederick and Washington counties in the Maryland House of Delegates.

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