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# Gov. Jindal signs prison sentence changes into law

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BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - Efforts aimed at cutting the cost of Louisiana's correctional system and lowering the rate re-offenders are expected to continue after Gov. Bobby Jindal this week signed new laws designed as building blocks of a broader sentencing revamp.

The Louisiana Sentencing Commission is expected to develop more ideas for 2012. Experts say the effectiveness of local drug courts, the harshness of narcotics laws and case information available to judges may be ripe for review, as lawmakers continue to look for budget cuts.

Two bills just signed by Jindal were weakened before they passed, including one to make low-risk offenders eligible for parole earlier.

That bill, by Rep. Joe Lopinto, R- Metairie, would have allowed low-risk offenders to serve more of their sentences under supervised parole rather than in prison.

As introduced, Lopinto's bill would have reduced mandatory prison time for a first felony from 33.3 percent of sentence to 25 percent; for a second felony from 50 percent to 25 percent; and for a third felony from 100 percent to 50 percent. But committees removed provisions affecting second-time and subsequent offenses in order to gain support of the state district attorney association.

Members of the sentencing commission said they preferred the original provisions.

State Appeals Court Judge Fredericka Wicker, a commission member, said the most significant cost savings would have come from reducing prison time for second-time offenders.

"With regard to the overwhelming numbers of people who are housed in Louisiana for non-violent, non-sex offenses, that would give us an opportunity to spend money more wisely, focus on preparing them for re-entry to the community and supervising them intensely for 18 months after they enter the community," she said.

Neither Lopinto nor commission members could say whether a bill to expand the parole eligibility to second- and third-time offenders will be re-introduced in 2012.

A second law by Lopinto to clarify parole eligibility also was weakened before passage.

Lopinto's bill would clarify "good time" and "earned time" policies, which determine how much credit an offender can build toward early release. The policies were previously scattered across several different parts of state code, making them difficult to understand.

"When you were sentencing someone for five years, and they said, 'When will I be eligible if I do good?' No one could answer that," said Lopinto.

The original bill would also have increased the amount of good-time credits an inmate can earn, but that provision was opposed by the Louisiana Sheriffs' Association. Lopinto said an amendment to maintain the existing formulas negated much of the cost savings of the bill, but still helped to clarify the law.

Other bills recommended by the Sentencing Commission passed largely intact, including a Lopinto proposal to let parole and probation officers sanction offenders who violate the conditions of their release.

Previously, officers had to return to court to impose administrative sanctions. The bill's supporters said that delayed punishment and increased the number of offenders who returned to prison for technical violations of parole and probation, rather than committing a new crime. Typical sanctions include community service or drug testing.

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Other laws signed by Jindal include a measure by Sen. Elbert Guillory, D-Opelousas, to require additional training and information for parole board members to make decisions about releasing inmates, and a bill by Rep. Helena Moreno, D-New Orleans, to increase oversight of inmates sentenced to home incarceration and electronic monitoring.

Jindal's office said all the measures he signed will improve the state's corrections system.

"These reforms will help make our criminal justice system operate more efficiently while also continuing to uphold our number one priority - protecting our communities and families from violence," said the governor upon signing the bills.

All of the measures focused on back-end policies - those related to release of inmates and re-entry into society. Next year, experts say, lawmakers may tackle front-end policies - particularly those related to drug use.

"It's really early to tell," said Ricky Babin, who chairs the Sentencing Commission. "We're just looking at (narcotics sentencing) because that's probably the largest group of non-violent offenders, you know, possession-type narcotics violators. Some jurisdictions have drug courts and various other things to deal with them, and some don't."

Lopinto said narcotics violations often are punished out of proportion with the severity of the crime, leading to long and expensive prison sentences.

"We shouldn't be spending \$2 million in taxpayers' money for \$250 of weed," said Lopinto.

Charles Riddle, a district attorney and member of the Sentencing Commission, said next year's proposals could focus on providing judges with the same level of risk assessment and background information that Guillory's law will provide to parole board members.

"We've got to know the background of each case," said Riddle.

[Marc Levin](#), who directs the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation's criminal justice arm, said voters will reward legislators who support sentencing reforms. Levin said that a "growing small-government strain of conservatism" makes the public more willing to consider ways to cut excess in even public safety programs.

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House Bills 414, 415, 416 and 106 and Senate Bill 202 can be found at [www.legis.state.la.us](http://www.legis.state.la.us)

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