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Justice Reinvestment update scheduled for Wednesday, model Tulsa program advances alternatives to incarceration

Written by Capitol Editor Patrick B. McGuigan Tuesday, 10 January 2012 16:58

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Oklahoma Speaker of the House Kris Steele and the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center Project Director Marshall Clement plan to discuss outcomes from the Oklahoma Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) at the state Capitol tomorrow (Wednesday, January 11).

The session comes as Women in Recovery (WIR), a Tulsa-based program supported by the George Kaiser Family Foundation, continues to advance and "model" an effective alternative to incarceration for non-violent crimes.

Steele and Clement will lead Wednesday's news conference and briefing in the Governor's Large Conference room, but the pair will be joined by other members of the state's JRI working group.

The JRI began in June and will run some 18 months. The program brings to bear "rigorous data analyses" to measure the effectiveness of public safety and corrections policies.

Oklahoma's focus on efforts to become "smart on crime" coincide with programs led by both CSG and the "Right on Crime" organization working with the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Speaker Steele has characterized the Lone Star State's efforts as "impressive on several fronts. Over the past five years, Texas has saved \$2 billion in incarceration costs and has its lowest violent crime rate in decades. These are both impressive achievements." In Steele's view, "perhaps the most important facet of their reforms is the fact that the Texas Legislature and the public took politics and emotions out of their debate and instead focused on the facts. By doing this, they came to the realization that there is a better way to approach criminal justice. Texas has long had a reputation as a tough-on-crime state, and it still has that reputation, but it is now achieving this distinction in a smarter, more effective way than it did in the past.

"Texas realized that some of the most important work in criminal justice occurs in the area of prevention, treatment and supervision of individuals known to be at risk of offending. In addition, they adjusted the state's resources accordingly to address this issue. As a result, Texas is utilizing their resources effectively and producing better outcomes at the same time."

The Texas Public Policy Foundation has documented, in several reports, the drive to hold nonviolent offenders accountable, provide effective supervision and still save money for taxpayers. Right on Crime efforts has the support of former U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese III and other national policy leaders.

In Tulsa last month, CapitolBeatOK joined hundreds of local residents to mark the notable achievements of 15 women who had completed the Women in Recovery (WIR) program. The celebration at the Hyatt Regency downtown underscored the fact that scores of women who have passed through WIR have gone on to successful workforce experiences, moving from being convicted felons to becoming taxpayers, involved parents and adults dedicated to good citizenship.



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Amy Santee of the Kaiser Foundation, reflected at the December graduation, "The majority of female offenders suffer from mental illness and addiction and are imprisoned for drug or drug related charges. But it was the devastating impact that female incarceration has on children that aligned so closely with the Foundation's mission. For it is those children whose lives will be irrevocably changed, the children who will face inherent disadvantages, the children who will be punished due to no fault of their own. For these reasons, the Foundation focused its effort and began to develop strategies to reduce the number of women sent to prison from Tulsa County.

"Women In Recovery is core to this strategy. The alternative to incarceration program demonstrates that there are better ways to hold offenders accountable, protect the public and achieve far better results for families and children than mass incarceration.

"Women In Recovery is grounded in best practices and research around trauma, addiction, mental illness, criminal behavior and family reunification."

Tarrasch, the WIR director, commented at the graduation event, "No one could accomplish everything that is being asked of our graduates if they had to do it alone. I don't think it would be possible. It takes many people working together. It took all of us.

"People do recover from alcoholism, and drug addiction, dual diagnosis, co-dependency, and more. People do get better. They just rarely do it alone."

Tarrasch asserted her pride at being part of "a team who daily go above and beyond the call of duty. They are proactive, unflappable, competent and they beautifully manage orchestrating the logistics to help women mend, recover and change."

Graduates of the WIR program, she says, entered the pioneering effort with "feelings of being powerless -- they felt trapped, frustrated and unsure of their identity. There was also a great deal of shame and embarrassment and a loss of personal dignity, particularly when they entered the criminal justice system."

The women who make it through WIR, she said, "are no longer an invisible population. At first, everyone's story is sad, there's abuse, trauma, unhealthy relationships, violence and often poverty, but thanks to the support and funding from the foundation, we have been able to integrate treatment for addiction and trauma which co-occur tragically for so many."

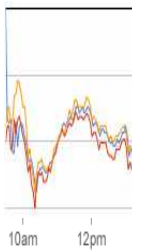
Women facing serious challenges "can overcome what seems at first like insurmountable obstacles." The program leads women to tackle addition, form connections to a recovery community and develop health connections to others.

Tarrasch praised her program's graduates because, "they have redefined themselves, they have become better human being, better sisters, spouses, friends; they are competent, self sufficient, they have forged new relationships with their family, they have become employees that businesses want to hire, and parents who's children can now trust and want to be with, they know how to avoid harmful situations, they have a GED (graduate equivalent degree) or have stepped into a college class, they think differently, hold themselves accountable and they want to do what is right, they have bank accounts and they are proud to be tax paying and contributing members of the Tulsa community."

Tarrasch has detailed the programs accountability standards in a past commentary for CapitolBeatOK. She says that WIR works because fundamentally, the program helps women emerge with "new morals and integrity."

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