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Madden, Levin: Public safety remains key focus of lawmakers

Program expansion targets prevention and controls costs

By Jerry Madden, and Marc Levin | July 24, 2013 | Updated: July 24, 2013 5:37pm

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Most Texans know that our state is a national leader in creating jobs, but we have also become a model for creating public safety.

Our statewide crime rate has fallen back to levels not seen since the 1960s, and the just-concluded 83rd Legislature built on our success by adopting new measures that will make us safer while cutting costs.

The hallmark of the state's recent efforts has been to invest in programs that will stop the revolving door of prisons and put offenders on track to become law-abiding citizens who support their families and communities. The new chair and vice chair of the Texas House Corrections Committee, Tan Parker, R-Flower Mound, and James White, R-Woodville, respectively, were clearly committed to continuing our record of smart reform. Houston Democratic Sen. John Whitmire's leadership on criminal justice legislation and the corrections budget was exceptional.

House appropriations members like Reps. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, and Sylvester Turner, D-Houston, continued the work to provide funding for drug treatment, intermediate sanctions to keep probationers and parolees in line, drug courts and other problem-solving courts, and probation and parole officers. These approaches reduce recidivism and the need for prisons. Most important, the budget expands availability of mental health programs, where great criminal justice savings can be obtained by treating people before they run afoul of the law.

Harris County is our state's largest county. With 2,000-3,000 mentally ill prisoners housed daily, it has the largest mental health population of any jail in our state. Under the leadership of Houston Republican Sen. Joan Huffman and others, the state authorized a pilot jail diversion program for low-level offenders, which promises to reduce the number of mentally ill offenders repeatedly incarcerated for minor offenses. Research shows that many of these individuals can be both law-abiding and productive when properly treated.

The Legislature also added important items to the Sunset Bill for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Lawmakers included a requirement for risk analysis and needs assessment of offenders. This will inform the individual supervision, treatment, incarceration and re-entry plans that match offenders to the programs that will have the greatest impact on their behavior. Another provision calls for measuring and reporting the effectiveness of re-entry programs.

The Legislature also expanded support for our highly effective specialty courts, authorizing prostitution-prevention courts based on our successful drug court model. This will divert many prostitutes from our jails and help set them on a law-abiding path.

Another longstanding concern of legislators has been the release of some inmates with no re-entry supervision. It is troubling that short-term, nonviolent (mostly drug) offenders - including some with a mental health diagnosis - have been released at the expiration of their sentences with no parole or probation supervision. The highest recidivism rates in the state are among this group of offenders. Senate Bill 1173 provides an option for split sentencing where a state jail term is followed by a term of probation. This approach will provide accountability and also require participation in treatment, which research predicts will reduce re-offending.

Finally, the Legislature passed legislation to reduce the number of students being ticketed or charged with low-

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level crimes for doing things most of us would call "kids being kids," such as making too much noise in class. This will keep more students in school and allow law enforcement to focus on actual threats to campus safety.

Taken together, these new policies and programs maintain the course set in 2007 when the state expanded its community-based facilities and programs that placed Texas as the vanguard of reform. Since then, the number of prisoners in Texas has fallen by nearly 8,000 and the number of juveniles incarcerated in state facilities is down more than 65 percent. Texas closed one prison in 2011, and we expect two more prison closures in the coming months based on the new budget, which trims the prison operations line item by \$97 million, the cost of two unneeded facilities. Meanwhile, the state's crime rate continues to fall, reaching its lowest level in 45 years.

We are proud to tell Texans that the 83rd Legislature kept our state on track as a model for how to improve public safety and control corrections costs. That's great news for Texas, and for the rest of the country.



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