

Posted on: Monday, July 16, 2007

Opinion

Time for leaders to take on real issues of prison reform

The new structure in Arizona that is tailor-made for Hawai'i inmates and the new facility on Maui have reinvigorated the thorny topic of prison reform in our state. The recent focus has primarily been on whether it is right or humane to send local prisoners to the Mainland.

But that is merely the consequence of a deeper issue: the growing prison population.

Because of "three strikes" and increased minimum sentences, this is a problem that is inevitably going to get worse. Other approaches — rehabilitation and re-entry — deserve more attention. Both require looking at two key questions: Who are we putting in prison, and what efforts are being made to ensure they don't return?

Far too many times, those incarcerated are in need of rehabilitation for drug or alcohol addictions, not prison time. And while there are some programs that assist inmates with reintegration into society, they are sorely lacking throughout the state. Luckily, there is hope on the horizon.

The Community Safety Act (SB 932), which just became law, rightly puts rehabilitation and re-entry at the center of the corrections system.

The law appropriates \$3.5 million for a one-year pilot program focused on employment and vocational training, substance abuse and mental health, housing and employment, literacy and education and family services. In addition, a network of re-entry programs will be created.

Currently, there is only one comprehensive reintegration program in the state. Being Empowered and Safe Together (BEST) on Maui begins the process of reintegration from the moment an inmate enters the prison. Vital services, such as drug treatment, anger management and family reunification, are provided.

Releasing inmates to society without giving them the skills they need to become productive citizens is senseless. The shift from punishment to rehabilitation is necessary if we are to break the cycle of recidivism — a costly burden on taxpayers in the long run.

One area of the law that deserves close scrutiny deals with requiring the state to bring inmates serving time in Mainland prisons back to Hawai'i to finish their terms at least a year prior to their scheduled parole or release. It is an important part of the legislation because it addresses recidivism. Reports have shown that inmates released into communities where they have the support of family and friends are more successful at reintegration.

The governor says that this would strain an overcrowded prison system.

But there are safeguards. The committee report on the bill states that the inmate's return is contingent on the availability of programs in Hawai'i. Another provision states that any inmate on the Mainland who is in an existing program may choose to stay. If the inmate cannot be returned in a year or less, the Department of Public Safety can file a report to the Legislature stating the reasons why.

That means we would only receive inmates for whom space and programs are available, not more than we can physically accommodate.

"This is an invitation for the Department of Public Safety to say we can't bring these inmates home because we need X number of beds, and we need this much money in the budget to get those beds," said **Kat Brady with the Community Alliance on Prisons**, a non-profit comprised of community groups, churches, ex-offenders and families working toward increasing programs for inmates. "This is the Legislature saying, 'We want to make a policy that puts rehabilitation and re-entry first, so tell us what you need to achieve this goal.'"

Texas and Kansas have also begun focusing on community-based programs for low-level, nonviolent offenders as an alternative to incarceration. Currently, the Hawai'i State Judiciary can sentence such offenders to adult probation, supervised release or Drug Court instead of incarceration, according to Public Safety Interim Director Clayton Frank,

Commitment to maintaining and expanding these efforts, however, is at the mercy of funding. Congress has an opportunity, if not an obligation, to change that by passing the Second Chance Act, which would provide federal grants to states that are developing programs to reintegrate inmates into their communities.

Prison reform doesn't simply mean creating more space.

It means changing a system that has become a revolving door for inmates.