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## Speaking Out: Stop the Prison Pipeline

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Florida has had a higher ratio of crimes of violence than the nation as a whole for over 40 years. Think of the number of murders, rapes and armed robberies that occurred in our state because the Legislature was unable or unwilling to act.

There is a solution to this problem that will not cost the state a single tax dollar. Florida should be able to reduce violent crime and at the same time reduce spending. Currently Florida taxpayers spend more than \$2 billion a year on prisons.

The solution is a simple two-step process based on examination of the prison population itself.

First, establish preconditions aside from current sentencing guidelines for release from prison.

Second, create a mechanism that enables inmates to meet the minimal preconditions for release.

The preconditions come from the characteristics of the prison population itself. There are five main characteristics of the prison population. They are: crime committed, age, education, job experience and recidivism.

Last year, more men, women and children were sent to prison for drug crimes than violent crimes. Whereas many sent to prisons for drug crimes were not addicts themselves, the system can speak to those that were.

In many cases the reality is we are sending addicts to prison for drug crimes and then releasing them into the national fabric of "ex-cons," where the recidivism rate is 68 percent.

In 2006, 63.9 percent (56,392) of the inmate population were in need of substance abuse treatment services. The Legislature only authorized 2,117 substance abuse treatment slots.

The most successful program is called the Program Center. Some 89.7 percent of those who completed this program had no recommitment to a Florida state prison or supervision within two years after release. In spite of such impressive performance, the Legislature only funded 871 slots for this program in 2006.

Twenty-five percent of prison admissions are men and women 24 years of age or less. Of those sent to prison in 2006, 50 percent were sentenced to two years or less. Now, think in terms of how many young men and women go to prison for less than six months to two years.

In 2006, there were over 88,000 inmates whose median level of education was seventh grade. By the same token we find that only 10 percent admitted that year had a 12th grade or higher education. Yet we find that only 1,322 inmates earned GEDs.

All trend lines indicate that the higher the education the less the chance of recidivism.

"Get tough on crime" policies have created a prison system that serves as a post graduate course in criminal activity and creates networks for future criminal conspiracies.

The solution to a reduction in recidivism is simple. Legislate minimum standards for prison release to be a GED or high school diploma, passing the Florida Ready to Work exam, and the successful completion of the Program Center for those diagnosed with drug problems.

The causality of education, drug abuse and work experience as it relates to crime may be debatable. However, the linkage is not.

Think of the paradigm shift associated with a prison sentence. For all too many youths, a prison sentence is an honorable rite of passage into adulthood. Now think in terms of young offenders held past their release dates because they do not meet the educational requirements to get out. Would that increase their motivation to acquire some education and job skills?

The framework for education comes from the Character Based Dormitory program. Essentially, this is a program that turns a prison dorm into a 24-hour education facility. They are being used in Texas, Oklahoma and Indiana. The Federal Bureau of Prisons is in the process of testing the program as well.

The startup cost per dorm of 72 inmates is about \$150,000. That amounts to \$5.70 per inmate per day. This cost can be covered by the Inmate Trust Fund, which has generated over \$36 million from canteen sales and phone call charges. Even if only half (\$18 million) were dedicated to this program that would fund the startup costs for 120 dorms or 8,640 inmates. The other \$18 million could be used to fund drug programs such as the Program Center.

That is more than enough to cover the initial admissions of young men and women to the prison system in the startup years of the program. Now think of the alternative.

The do-nothing approach is to spend \$56,940 when that inmate returns for a three-year sentence. Bear in mind that the current do-nothing approach in Florida is generating a 43 percent state prison recidivism rate. Even if this program is a total bust, it will not have cost the taxpayer a single dime.

The results of the do-nothing approach are predictable; of the 33,348 inmates released last year, 15,500 will return to prison and cost the state about \$310 million per year they spend in prison.

When will Florida's citizens demand that their representative do what is wise and frugal rather than what feeds the already bloated prison industry?