

Time to get tough on prison spending, too

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As leaders of a national conservative movement called Right on Crime, we believe that by applying conservative principles to criminal justice policy, states like New Mexico can build a more cost-effective system that increases protections for citizens and victims. We stand ready to help New Mexico follow the same path taken by a growing number of states and reap similar rewards.

With more and more public money going to state corrections, the time is right for New Mexico conservatives to ask the fiscally prudent question: "How can we get the most from the money we spend on public safety?"

Launched in "tough-on-crime" Texas, Right on Crime is anchored in the belief that for too long, conservatives have abandoned their limited government principles when it comes to criminal justice spending – pushing construction of prisons without regard to cost or, more importantly, whether such an approach actually improves public safety.

Our prison system now costs states more than \$50 billion per year, up from \$11 billion in the mid-1980s. The corrections business has been the second-fastest growing area of state budgets, trailing only Medicaid.

These huge investments might make sense if we were earning significant public safety dividends, but we are not. Instead, recidivism rates remain unacceptably high. In New Mexico, for example, 44 percent of offenders released in 2007 had committed a new crime and landed back in prison within three years.

With such a poor return on investment, conservatives can no longer sit idly by. They must challenge ineffective public spending on prisons just as they have sounded the alarm on wasteful expenditures for other government programs.

Fortunately, momentum for change is building around the country. Conservative governors and legislators in states like Georgia, South Dakota and Ohio are taking the lead in pushing sensible criminal justice reform, following the approach pioneered by Texas.

Facing an increase of \$2 billion in prison costs, Texas leaders in 2007 chose another path, expanding treatment and diversion programs and increasing the use of parole for low-risk offenders. In the wake of the reforms, parole revocations are down by 39 percent, Texas closed one prison in 2011 and is scheduled to close two more in 2013. Most importantly, Texas is now experiencing its lowest crime rate since 1968 and these steps have saved taxpayers over \$2 billion.

A few weeks ago, former Texas legislator Jerry Madden spoke at a joint hearing of the New Mexico Legislature Committee on Courts, Corrections, and Justice. He shared with New Mexico leaders the experiences of these other states. What happens next is up to the Legislature and executive branch, but there is no doubt New Mexico can benefit from a new direction.

According to the New Mexico Department of Corrections, New Mexico has 6,774 incarcerated prisoners and almost 17,300 on probation and parole. New Mexico spends from just over \$29,000 a year for female prisoners to just over \$38,000 a year for males incarcerated in state facilities.

Lawmakers have multiple options when it comes to reform. One natural starting point would be the establishment of a commission to lead a comprehensive review of corrections and criminal justice policies.

Such a review would reveal what's driving inmate population growth and costs in New Mexico, what changes might be appropriate, and how government spending can most effectively be controlled while continuing to protect public safety.

One example brought up by committee members was that a second-degree murderer could be sentenced to from 0 to 18 years while the minimum sentence for a drug trafficker was 19 years even if all they did was pass a drug from one cell to the next one. Ask yourself if that makes sense.

Strong conservative leadership on corrections that makes government more accountable and more cost-effective is a winning recipe. We look forward to providing support as New Mexico lawmakers craft sensible policies to reduce crime, restore victims and control costs.

The bottom line is this: It's time to be as tough on criminal justice spending as we are on the criminals who threaten our public safety.