

# Let's right-size the new jail

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Guest Columnist

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Earlier this year, conservative leaders Newt Gingrich and Pat Nolan called upon state legislators to “think and act with courage and creativity” by adopting smart criminal justice reforms that can both save taxpayer dollars and protect community safety.

And here in Louisiana, Gov. Bobby Jindal recently launched a joint initiative with the Pew Center to identify criminal-justice reforms that will reduce Louisiana’s bloated prison population to more manageable levels.

Lafourche Parish now has the chance to act with similar courage and creativity.

About two years ago, the parish brought in a jail consultant to identify solutions to its jail overcrowding problems.

He identified a number of problems in the criminal justice system that drive the overcrowding and recommended that the parish undertake a planning process “to identify and implement system changes, and alternatives to incarceration.”

Without sensible criminal justice reforms, the consultant predicted that the parish would need to nearly quadruple the size of its jail, from its current 242 beds to about 900 beds.

Parish officials estimate that this may cost as much as \$50 million — money that will come straight from the pockets of the parish’s taxpayers.

Before undertaking this massively expensive project, Lafourche’s voters should consider whether the system changes that the consultant suggested — but that the parish never adopted — could give a better value for their money, both now and in the long term.

A smaller jail can save taxpayers money on both construction and annual operation costs — money that could otherwise be used to pay for crime-prevention programs and efforts to rehabilitate criminals so that they stop offending, that could improve the parish’s schools or that could be put back in taxpayers’ pockets.

Rather than paying to build and fill a massive new jail, Lafourche can reduce the need for detention beds by adopting several simple reforms.

First, the parish can implement a pretrial services program that uses evidence-based assessments to determine which defendants can safely be released pending trial and which ones need to stay locked up.

Such programs are proven to save money.

For example, a 2007 study in North Carolina found that implementing a pretrial services program saved each county an average of \$1.05 million per year.

Second, the parish can eliminate inefficiencies the consultant identified that slow down the progress of criminal cases, such as delays in getting drug tests and exchanging paperwork between agencies.

Third, the parish can expand pretrial diversion programs that target nonviolent offenders.

Fourth, the parish can change policies to prevent unnecessary arrests.

For example, the Lafourche clerk of courts has a penny-wise, pound-foolish policy of never sending reminders to defendants about upcoming court dates unless a bench warrant has been issued — even though sending such reminders could make forgetful defendants show up when they might otherwise get arrested (and then spend time in jail) for failing to appear.

Last year, after a searching examination of its criminal justice system, Orleans Parish chose to reject a proposed 5,800-bed jail and instead adopt several criminal-justice reforms that will allow the parish to use a much smaller 1,438-bed jail.

The first of the reforms — issuing summonses instead of arresting for minor offenses, and not arresting people on minor out-of-parish warrants — are already resulting in big savings without affecting public safety.

In just the first quarter of 2011, Orleans Parish has saved \$1.9 million under the new policies and expects to save tens of millions more in the coming years.

Before raising taxes to build a 900-bed behemoth, Lafourche should consider adopting Orleans' path to a smaller, smarter jail.

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