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State should close excess prisons, but in the right way

By DOMINIC M. CALABRO, ROBERT STORK and ALLISON DeFOOR, FLORIDA VOICES

BY THE NUMBERS

A Florida TaxWatch data analysis released in December included several findings about Florida's criminal justice system:

- In the fiscal year ending June 30, Florida spent \$2.4 billion to incarcerate more than 102,000 people (a figure that doesn't include those sentenced to time in county jails).
- Of those people, more than 70,000 were imprisoned for nonviolent offenses, and more than 40,000 were incarcerated solely for violations of the terms of previous probation sentences.
- The state spent more than \$300 million on people incarcerated on drug offenses.
- The state's prison population has doubled since 1990.
- Florida's prison population growth rate is among the fastest in the nation. More than half the states saw prison populations decrease from 2008-2009 (a decrease commensurate with dropping crime rates); in that same year, Florida's prison population increased by 1,500 inmates. Only Pennsylvania grew more.
- With no changes, Florida's prisons will consume more than 11 percent of the state budget in the coming fiscal year.

— Source: "Review of Criminal Justice Data" report by Florida TaxWatch

A new poll shows that Floridians support criminal and juvenile justice reforms that can reduce crime, reduce the recidivism rate of offenders, and save taxpayers money. Some of the more notable findings: More than 80 percent support changes to the system to utilize supervised work-release programs, drug testing, and mental health treatment for nonviolent offenders; 73 percent agree that savings should be spent on a stronger probation and parole system; 81 percent support evidence-driven, community-based alternatives to juvenile prisons; and 59 percent are supportive of using pretrial services like ankle monitoring and risk assessments in lieu of jail time, when appropriate, for defendants awaiting trial.

Released by Florida TaxWatch and Associated Industries of Florida, in consultation with Texas-based think tank Right on Crime, the poll shows that an overwhelming majority of Florida Republicans support what we call "Smart Justice." A Smart Justice approach is centered on the belief that public safety is paramount, and that reforms can be made that not only save money, but actually increase public safety.

Corrections spending has skyrocketed in recent decades in Florida, accompanied by a severe rise in incarceration rates, consistently nourishing the "prison industrial complex"--which merely focuses on the growth and building of new prisons, rather than on results like ensuring fewer repeat offenders. Only in the last few years has this trend begun to reverse, and it is our goal to provide Florida's policymakers with the tools to accelerate Florida's return to lower corrections spending and safer streets for us all. In December

2011, the Florida TaxWatch Center for Smart Justice released a major study of Florida corrections data, to give the Florida Legislature a whole toolbox full of empirical evidence to back up the need for reforms.

Consistent with the public's clear desire to control the costs of the corrections system, and with the Florida TaxWatch data review, was the announcement by Department of Corrections Secretary Ken Tucker that the department would be closing underutilized prison facilities, and consolidating inmates into available beds elsewhere. Florida TaxWatch has recommended for several years now that Florida's corrections policies and costs were in great need of smart reforms, starting with the elimination of over-built and unnecessary prison facilities, and the state decision to close upward of 5,000 beds is entirely consistent with those recommendations.

In reality, some individuals and communities will lose jobs and some industries will be affected; however, we must remember that maintaining taxpayer-funded facilities that are not needed is government waste, not economic development. Given the potentially significant effect that these closures will have on the surrounding communities, though, it is especially important that the closure decisions are made with the best criteria in a fully transparent process.

As the state moves forward with that process, the most effective measure of success will be recidivism rates, and the ability for those released from incarceration or diverted into pre-trial programs to re-enter society and make a positive contribution. In simple terms, the majority of both new crime and admissions to state prisons are now by repeat offenders. We must be able to measure whether our programs prepare people with the skills they need to cope and succeed in society through training, education, and treatment while in state custody, all of which studies have consistently shown produces less crime, fewer victims, and more value for tax dollars.

The closure of these facilities is a historic first step, but more can be done. As shown in this new poll, the people of Florida have spoken. Smart Justice reforms are the right answer for Florida.

Calabro is president/CEO of Florida TaxWatch; Stork is chairman and DeFoor is vice-chairman of the Florida TaxWatch Center for Smart Justice.

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