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Putting the right people in prison

Work group studying changes in law for better sentencing

By Bob Watson

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Missouri's prisons have grown from holding about 5,000 inmates in 1990, to housing 30,739 inmates as of July 31.

And one estimate suggests the number could nearly double to 59,684 inmates by 2016.

So, with a goal of cutting both the costs of prison operations and the number of people sent to live in them, the Missouri Working Group on Sentencing and Corrections got public backing Wednesday morning from Gov. Jay Nixon.

"We are working with local, community leadership — particularly faith-based groups — to keep those at-risk out of prison and to keep those who have been released from prison from going back," Nixon said during a news conference in his Capitol office.

"The success of the diversion programs — such as the Missouri Re-Entry Process and specialty courts such as drug courts — is demonstrated in Missouri's steadily dropping rate of recidivism."

That's the number of inmates who, after their release, violate their parole or commit a new crime, and return to prison.

The working group is chaired by state Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia and a former associate circuit judge, and Sen. Jack Goodman, R-Mount Vernon and a former assistant prosecutor.

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"I don't think we need to back away from being tough on crime," Kelly told reporters. "When I was a judge, I put a lot of people in jail — and they needed to be in jail.

"(But) we want (non-violent, short-term-sentence) people — if they go to prison — to come out and not come back."

Goodman said he's disappointed "many of the concerted efforts we've made as a state have not improved recidivism the way we need it to be improved. ... I think every state, every society, will always have a certain segment that will be re-offenders.

"Our goal needs to be to reduce that as significantly as we can ... applying data-driven, evidence-based analysis to, holistically, synthesize that into a safer state."

Other group members include Supreme Court Judge Ray Price, Corrections Director George Lombardi, Probation and Parole chairman Ellis McSwain, state Public Defender Catherine "Cat" Kelly and Jason Lamb, the state Office of Prosecution Services executive director.

"For everyone involved, public safety will be the primary, important consideration," Nixon noted. "This Working Group will actively solicit the input of law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, victim advocates and other stakeholders in our criminal justice system."

The group spent about six hours this week, spread over two days, studying detailed Corrections and Probation

and Parole statistics about crimes, inmates and those who get released from prison.

Among those numbers: Missouri imprisons 509 inmates for each 100,000 state residents, while the national average is only 442 people per 100,000, and the state places just 1,260 people on probation for each 100,000 residents, 529 people below the 1,789-person national average.

About three-fourths of those — 77 percent — are sentenced for non-violent crimes while 23 percent of the sentences involve violent crimes.

"The people of Missouri deserve to be safe in their homes and on our streets," Price said. "The public safety is, and will always be, the primary concern of the Missouri judiciary and the criminal justice system.

"The people of Missouri also deserve to know that every tax dollar that is spent on their behalf is (spent) effectively and efficiently."

Also, the statistics show, 73 percent of Missouri prisons' admissions involve people whose probation or parole was revoked because of violations, while only 27 percent of the sentences involve new court commitments.

Kelly told Working Group members during Wednesday afternoon's session it's important to emphasize that, whatever changes they recommend: "A lot of this work is going to be with people who are involved with (less serious) C and D felonies, and with probation violators.

"It's not going to be the more violent offenders."

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