

# **“Counting the Costs”: Public Safety and Prisoner Reentry Bills**

## **Talking Points**

### **Begin with the ‘Big Picture’...**

- 2 million Americans are incarcerated in US; 1 in every 100 persons is in the criminal justice system
- The United States incarcerates more than any other country in the world
- 95% of those incarcerated will be released
- The United States spends \$60 billion/yr. on corrections with a 70% rate of recidivism

### **Bring It Home to New Jersey...**

- New Jersey prison population has increased by 400% in less than three decades
- \$1.2 billion/yr. on corrections with a 67% re-arrested within 3 years of release (costing \$39k/inmate)
- The average person in NJ prisons functions at grade 6<sup>th</sup> reading level and grade 5<sup>th</sup> math level; only 2% of corrections budget is spent on educational programming
- \$331 million to incarcerate non-violent offenders
- NJ ranked 44/50 US States in a national report card for the number of barriers to successful reentry/reintegration

### **Talk About Who Is In New Jersey’s Prisons...**

- People of color comprise just 28% of the population but account for 83% of the prison population
- African-American/White Ratio in New Jersey prisons 12:1 (v. 6:1 Ratio Nationally)
- 50% are non-violent and New Jersey has the highest proportion of non-violent drug offenders in the nation
- 1/3 are diagnosed with a mental illness or chronic health conditions
- 42% of NJ prisoners are under the age of 30

### **Share Why It Matters That Our Current Policies Are Not Working...**

- NJ taxpayers are seeing less money go toward our schools, hospitals, roads, and neighborhoods
- Public safety is not enhanced as incarceration is not reducing the risk that individuals will commit further crimes
- New Jersey taxpayers will continue to foot the bill for the collateral damage that results from incarceration, lack of successful reentry, and recidivism —family services, welfare, unemployment, addiction treatment, etc.
- Given tough economic times, we simply cannot afford to prop up a failing criminal justice system—*we must do better*

## **Tell Our Story...**

New Jersey lawmakers have been engaged in a serious exploration of our criminal justice policies and practices. Last September, under the leadership of Assembly Majority Leader Bonnie Watson Coleman and in partnership with other state legislators, New Jersey launched a series of "Counting the Costs" community-based, public hearings across the State. We began the work with a "listening session" where New Jersey residents most directly affected by criminal justice policies--formerly/currently incarcerated people, family members, advocates, providers, etc--came and presented their policy recommendations to a panel of legislators. From there, a representative "working group" was developed to help guide the hearing process and shape the resulting policies toward criminal justice reform. From November to August, legislators visited four New Jersey correctional facilities, held eight regional, public hearings and two roundtable discussions on the following topics: families and incarceration; sentencing laws; education/training/treatment; mental health/health care; prison conditions; women; reentry/reintegration rights; national "best practices"; the juvenile waiver law; and a New Jersey Commissioner's Roundtable. In all, more than 1500 people attended, representing over a dozen districts, and more than three hundred testimonies were given to over twenty legislators.

## **Discuss What We Heard Throughout a Year of Collecting More Than 300 Testimonies and Recommendations...**

- Using time in prison productively enhances public safety and saves taxpayer dollars
- Having paid their debt to society, the majority of people leave prison intending to be productive citizens—to work, pay taxes, and take care of their families
- There are currently insurmountable barriers to employment, reducing debt, educational opportunities, housing, health and social services, and supporting their families
- Women and children are disproportionately impacted by incarceration and require gender responsive and family-focused support.

## **Present the 6 Bills--NJ's Taxpayer Recommendations Based on Experience, Expertise, and Evidence...**

### **Strengthening Women and Families Act**

- Lifts the felony drug ban on TANF and food stamps
- Eliminates the prison phone surcharge
- Requires family impact statements on pre-sentencing reports
- Establishes a commission to strengthen bonds between incarcerated parents and their children
- Appoints an Assistant Commissioner for Incarcerated Women
- Prohibits transferring female inmates to male institutions
- Requires classification assignments to place inmates in facilities as close as possible to family.
- Establishes the Division on Women as the semiannual depository for all female inmate complaints

### **Employment**

- Creates a restricted use driver's license for the purpose of getting to work, education, and training
- Removes categorical employment bars for: limousine services, places that serve alcohol, airports, etc
- Bans the criminal background question box on state, county, and municipal job applications
- Prohibits employers from discriminating against job applicants on the basis of a criminal record
- Requires employers to consider a returning individual's certificate of rehabilitation

### **Prison /Prisoners**

- Increases the non-"taxable" amount accrued for inmate accounts

- Establishes the Dept. of the Public Advocate as the depository for all inmate complaints
- Requires ACA-based correctional officer training
- Issues a uniform identification card for visiting attorneys

### **Reduction of Recidivism**

- Establishes a “Faith-Based” Programs Coordinator for DOC for returning individuals
- Allows for a 90-day grace period for outstanding fines
- Provides returning inmates with: photo ID; medical records; rap sheet; accounting of fines owed; etc
- Eliminates the post-release Medicaid enrollment gap
- Establishes Mental Health Courts
- Establishes a Prisoner Reentry Commission
- Establishes a Blue Ribbon Panel for Review of Long-Term Prisoners’ Parole Eligibility

### **Education and Rehabilitation**

- Inventories vocational programs in order to meet demand job skills and standards
- Requires inmates to achieve 8<sup>th</sup> grade literacy with few exceptions
- Requires DOC to make GED classes available to all inmates who request
- Requires GED certificates to be issued by Dept. of Education (DOE)
- Allows formerly incarcerated persons to visit any prison in the State for motivational purposes
- Caps parole ‘hits’ at 3 years before being given another hearing
- Allows inmates to enter agreements for ed, training, etc that decreases parole terms

### **Court Empowerment**

- Provides discretion to courts to reduce accumulated fines and penalties
- Includes restorative justice mediation as an alternative sentence
- Expands access to expungement

### **Explain Next Steps and Encourage Support for the Bills...**

1. These bills will be introduced publicly and moved for committee and floor votes during the “lame duck” legislative session which runs from November to January
2. A broad coalition of community organizations, faith leaders, legislators, law enforcement officials, directly affected persons, and the public at large are working together to build support for the passage of these well informed, carefully shaped bills that reflect our collective voice across the State
3. ***WE NEED YOU TO SUPPORT THESE BILLS so that we can break the cycle of recidivism to enhance public safety and save taxpayer dollars***