

OPINION

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READERS' VIEWS

Louisiana needs prison reforms

If you want to understand where Louisiana's state budget dollars are spent, just remember three words — educate, medicate, incarcerate. The majority of Louisiana's state budget is focused on education, health care and public safety.

In Louisiana, we have heard much in recent months about efforts to address education and health care. Blueprint Louisiana believes it is time to reform our state public safety/corrections system, too — with the dual goals of improving cost effectiveness and public safety.

Recent reform efforts in other states provide strong evidence that Louisiana can achieve both goals.

Here are the facts. Our state has the largest prison population per capita in the nation. One in every 55 adults in Louisiana is behind bars. This year alone, Louisiana will spend more than \$670 million on adult corrections.

Unfortunately, a lot of our corrections dollars are being spent to lock up nonviolent, low-risk offenders for relatively minor offenses — needlessly inflating Louisiana's corrections budget and straining our ability to focus on higher-risk and violent offenders.

Offenders convicted of nonviolent offenses accounted for 82 percent of all prison admissions in Louisiana. Almost half of all new prison admissions are offenders sent back to prison not for new crimes but for technical violations, such as failure to show up at the probation office, failure to file a report or a positive drug test.

These low-level violations and certain nonviolent drug-related crimes can be effectively

punished (and diminished over time) using other proven methods that are much less expensive than prison.

Blueprint Louisiana supports this "smart-on-crime" approach.

Other states are demonstrating it is possible to cut prison costs while keeping the public safe. Led by conservative Republicans, Rep. Jerry Madden and Gov. Rick Perry and Democratic leaders in the Senate, Texas enacted sweeping reforms that have saved the state nearly \$2 billion over the past four years.

South Carolina, Kentucky, Arkansas, Arizona and Kansas also have implemented evidence-based policies to improve public safety while controlling corrections costs. Louisiana should join this reform movement by enacting House Bill 414 and House Bill 416 currently before the Legislature.

These reforms will ensure available prison space for violent offenders, slow the revolving door of our prisons, improve transparency for victims of crime and improve taxpayers' return on their public safety dollars, saving the state more than \$75 million over the next 10 years.

The politics of enacting reasonable corrections reform are always difficult. However, Blueprint Louisiana believes that to really be "tough on crime" we must adopt policies that actually help reduce crime and free more of our scarce resources on those who would threaten our public safety.

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