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Time to fix broken criminal justice system

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JUNE 26, 2009 -- We all have a stake in fixing our state's broken criminal justice system, and this is the time to encourage our representatives to make the streets and schools safer while holding down government growth.

This weekend, the General Assembly-appointed Sentencing Reform Commission (SRC) will hold a public retreat in Charleston aimed at coming up with cost-effective strategies for improving public safety. The Pew Center on States has analyzed the fiscal and human cost of the current SC system: one person in 38 is in prison, on probation, or on parole; 6.6 percent of general state funds is allotted to probation; we spend \$1 on prisons for every 6 cents spent on probation and parole.



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We applaud the SRC's willingness to listen to outside experts and learn from other states' best practices. We hope they are open to creative solutions that will increase public safety and make prudent use of taxpayers' funding.

- 1) We urge that the SRC become a permanent, standing commission with a broader mandate, one that looks at factors that drive over-population in South Carolina prisons and sends too many non-violent people, including juveniles, to jail.
- 2) We urge that the funding the State saves by changing our sentencing practices be invested in people – not prisons. Other states have reinvested corrections dollars in communities, especially those where most ex-offenders return, so that these folks can successfully reintegrate into society. These smart investments in people reduce crime and result in more productive, tax-paying citizens.
- 3) We oppose so-called "truth in sentencing," which too often means mandatory minimum sentences by another name. Alternatives to incarceration, such as residential drug treatment, intensive community reporting, house arrest, and half-way houses that allow folks to continue working are cheaper and often more effective than time behind bars. They also keep people working and families together so the impact of criminal justice involvement is less grave on the community as a whole.
- 4) We also oppose any measures like the "three strikes" rule which have taken away flexibility in sentencing and led to unjust sentences for minor crimes. Under "three strikes" provisions, our prisons are now overflowing with individuals convicted of low level offenses, serving longer and longer sentences at greater and greater cost – with very little benefit for public safety.

Doing nothing will not only guarantee an increase in our prison population, it will increase the number of victims in our communities at an escalating cost to the public. We jail too many

non-violent drug offenders, rather than treating them and turning them into productive, tax-paying citizens. We are sending too many children to jail rather than supporting them and their families with intervention that will correct behavioral problems early and keep them in school. To stop the cycle of violence requires imagination and courage as well as good policy.

A remarkable woman demonstrated this last weekend at a forum co-sponsored by the Community Partnership in Charleston. Vanessa Halyard is an advocate for victims and for abused children who, after her only son was murdered, reached out to the killer's mother. She took a bold step to break the cycle of violence, because she knows that punishment is not enough. It requires bold leadership to make real change, and it requires the community to support bold initiatives. We hope the SRC will propose real change, but enacting these reforms will only happen if average citizens care enough. The SRC's appearance in Charleston June 26-27 is a chance to show that we care.

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