Smart Justice: Reducing Recidivism Reduces Taxpayer Costs

By: Jim Turner | Posted: October 2, 2012 12:49 PM

A coalition of tax watchdogs and business lobbying outfits is working toward legislation aimed at reducing criminal recidivism and thus saving taxpayer dollars.

The Florida Smart Justice Alliance, which includes Associated Industries of Florida and Florida TaxWatch, says it is seeking alternatives to incarceration that would be more effective and eventually cut some of the $2.1 billion a year price tag on the incarceration of around 100,000 inmates.

The group has already started meeting with judges, sheriffs and others in the criminal justice pipeline as it prepares for a Dec. 12-14 summit in Orlando. The goal of the summit will be to reach consensus on providing assistance in an institutional rehab program -- a program that could be offered to the state Legislature.

“Maybe in the short-run penny wise, but in the long-term it is pound foolish not to give people the treatment and rehab that is available,” AIF President Tom Feeney said Tuesday during a media conference at the Florida Press Center in Tallahassee.

“One of the things I like that the Alliance is doing -- I’m not an expert in any of these matters -- is that they are studying what works and what doesn’t work in 49 other states and in fact around the free
world.”

Mark Flynn, president and chief executive officer of Florida Smart Justice Association, said one proposal to establish a trio of assistance institutions across the state for nonviolent drug offenders could save Florida $20 million through reducing the cost of incarceration and the risk of those individuals returning to prison.

“Our goal is to identify productive alternatives to incarceration on the front end and better transitioning efforts for those prisoners who are being released back into their communities,” Flynn said.

A big hurdle may be the governor’s office.

Last April, Gov. Rick Scott vetoed a carefully crafted bill by Sen. Ellyn Bogdanoff that was intended to help people in prison deal with their drug addiction.

The bill (HB 177), backed 40-0 by the Senate and 112-4 in the House, would have offered modest reform by moving a small group of drug-addicted inmates into a treatment program once they serve half their time. They would still have been in custody but not behind bars.

Scott said the effort would have broken the state law that requires a prisoner to serve 85 percent of his or her sentence.

“Justice to victims of crime is not served when a criminal is permitted to be released early from a sentence imposed by the courts,” Scott wrote in his veto message. “This bill would permit criminals to be released after serving 50 percent of their sentences, thus creating an unwarranted exception to the rule that inmates serve 85 percent of their imposed sentences.”

The Florida Smart Justice Alliance evolved in part from AIF’s Smart Justice Council, where Flynn served as executive director.

Other organizations participating in the alliance include American Probation and Parole Association, Bridges of America, the Collins Center for Public Policy, Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association, Florida Association of Community Corrections, Florida Chamber of Commerce, Florida Council for Community Mental Health, Florida Juvenile Justice Association, Florida Partners in Crisis, the James Madison Institute, and Right on Crime.

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