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EDITORIAL

Shrinking the Prison Population

Congress took an important step last year when it passed the Second Chance Act to help former inmates return to their communities. If properly financed and carried out, the act could cut recidivism, and ruinous prison costs for the states, by helping them develop programs to provide job placement, drug treatment, mental health care and other services that former prisoners need to build viable, crime-free lives.

Congress does not have to look far for proven programs. New prison sentencing and re-entry policies are already taking hold in several states, thanks in part to work by the Council of State Governments' prison policy arm, the Justice Center, with the support of the Pew Charitable Trust's Center on the States.

Their results have been especially impressive in Texas and Kansas, law-and-order states that were facing huge increases in their prison populations before they turned to the Justice Center for analyses and policy suggestions. Last month, representatives from both states testified about their experience before a House appropriations subcommittee.

State officials said that after studying the problem they found their prison populations were being driven up, not by crime, but mainly by breakdowns in their parole and probation systems.

Simply put, they were sending too many people back to jail. Many were drug-addicted or mentally ill offenders who could be safely dealt with in community programs.

Legislatures in both states decided to expand community-based drug treatment and mental health services, and encouraged localities to provide closer supervision for released inmates. The changes, put in place two years ago, have yielded especially strong results in Texas. State officials said that the new system had already reduced parole revocations by an astonishing 25 percent and helped the state avoid a projected increase in the prison population that would have cost the Texas treasury hundreds of millions of dollars.

With the economy in recession, and prison costs rising, states that used to lock up as many inmates as possible are looking for sensible alternatives. President Obama has asked Congress to commit more than \$100 million to prisoner re-entry programs, with three-quarters going to the Second Chance Act. That would be a good down payment, but only a down payment, on what is needed.

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