



Lawmakers may take on criminal justice reform with commission

Rebecca Boyle, (Bio) rboyle@greeleytribune.com

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Today in Denver, state lawmakers are poised to form a group to study criminal justice in Colorado, which many believe is a step to reducing prison populations and cutting crime.

But it's the criminal justice system, so naturally, there are opposing views about how to do it.

The Colorado Criminal and Juvenile Justice Commission would collect data about Colorado's prison population, examine the state's sentencing scheme, consider alternatives to incarceration, and make policy recommendations.

"It's time that Colorado got smart about crime," said state Rep. Terrance Carroll, D-Denver, the bill's sponsor. "It's easy for someone to say we're going to be tough on crime, but that doesn't require any thought. We have to be thoughtful on crime, smarter about how we deal with crime."

While many others agree the notion is a noble one, they are wary of how it might unfold.

Weld District Attorney Ken Buck is wary of the commission's intent.

"I want to make sure this is a criminal justice bill and not a sentence reduction bill," he said.

The director of the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition, which advocates the reduction in prison expansion, said the commission is a step in the right direction. But she added that as planned, it doesn't have enough involvement from regular residents.

"People in the community are the ones dealing with these issues on a daily basis in their lives. The struggles and the challenges are in the community," Christie Donner said. "This cannot just be about bureaucrats getting together, bureaucrats and politicians, and that's what it is right now."

Carroll said the measure came from a document that has been the genesis of many a unique idea: Colorado's strapped budget.

He said 22,000 people are incarcerated in Colorado, and if the state keeps its current pace, that number will rise to 28,000 in the next four years. Spending on corrections puts a major strain on the state budget, which also is hamstrung by spending limitations.

"It hurts other things like transportation, K-12, higher education, things that people care about," Carroll said.

The commission would look at ways to reduce recidivism, which means re-offending after being released from prison, as one way to reduce the population. Other possibilities could include changing the state's sentencing guidelines or mandatory minimum sentences, although nothing in the bill would require that.

"This bill merely says we're going to get a commission together, of experts and lay people," Carroll said. "We're going to look at empirical data -- it's going to be fact-based, there's no ideology in this whatsoever."

But Buck worries the commission will strongly advocate for changing the state's sentencing structure, which could result in offenders being released sooner. He said that's what defense attorneys want to see.

"They are trying to reduce sentences in Colorado, and they are using as their ruse the fact that we have overcrowded jails and juvenile justice facilities," he said.

State Rep. Jim Riesberg, D-Greeley, said he hasn't yet looked at the bill because it hasn't had a committee hearing yet, but in general, he supports reform.

"We are in a position in Colorado where they are projecting we need to add 1,000 prison beds a year for as far as we can see, and we don't have the capability of doing that," he said.

The alternative is to make other use of the beds the state does have, or consider changes to sentencing guidelines.

"It's either that or build more prisons," Riesberg said.

The commission would have 24 members, plus a director to be appointed by Gov. Bill Ritter, and would work over five years to come up with achievable standards and goals.

Carroll said those involved want the best solutions no matter where they come from.

"It's about being smart about how we do criminal justice," he said.

What's Next

The House Judiciary Committee is scheduled to hear House Bill 1358, the Colorado Criminal and Juvenile Justice Commission, at 1:30 p.m. today in Room 0112 at the Colorado State Capitol, 200 W. Colfax, Denver.

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