



Statewide commission makes sense

Tribune Opinion

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Money -- and the lack of it -- is always a great motivator.

In cash-strapped Colorado, it can also be a means to innovation, as lawmakers look for creative ways to tackle problems without simply throwing money at them.

In that vein, we support the idea of a statewide criminal justice commission.

House Bill 1358, which is waiting to be heard by the House Appropriations Committee, would create a new Colorado Criminal and Juvenile Justice Commission.

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

Over several years, the commission could come up with ways for Colorado to tackle recidivism, which is convicted offenders committing more crimes. That is good for everyone -- the criminals, the victims and society in general. Of course, it also helps Colorado's budget.

The commission sounds promising. But we share Weld District Attorney Ken Buck's wariness about its intent.

He believes the commission will recommend changing Colorado's sentencing guidelines, which contain mandatory minimum sentences for several crimes.

Buck, whose job requirement is protecting the community, does not want to see a reduction in criminal sentences stem from the commission's work.

And neither do we.

Weld judges have handed down several tough sentences for violent crimes, and that means justice for the victims, their families and their community.

For example, last month, a 38-year-old Greeley man received two sentences of 40 years to life for sexual assault on a child. Colorado law requires an indeterminate range -- up to life in prison -- for sex offenders.

And several Greeley gang members are in prison for the next several decades thanks to minimum sentence requirements for homicide charges.

Considering changes to Colorado sentencing guidelines could also mean reexamining the death penalty -- something state lawmakers have already tried.

Just this Wednesday, the House of Representatives killed a measure that would have shrunk the state's capital crimes unit, which investigates people who are eligible for the death penalty.

Rep. Paul Weissmann, D-Boulder, said Colorado's dearth of death row inmates shows the state does not need four people to investigate such crimes.

But Rep. Steve King, R-Grand Junction, said the bill moves in the direction of eliminating the death penalty, which eliminates options for prosecutors.

Often, accused criminals take guilty pleas and accept life sentences rather than face the prospect of death row, he said.

We agree with King, and we were glad to see the measure voted down.

House Bill 1358 is waiting for action by the House Appropriations Committee.

Here's hoping for a solid measure that will take a hard, fiscally responsible look at crime in Colorado, without making things easier for the people who commit it.

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