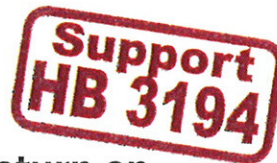


OregonBusiness



Public safety reform offers better return on investment

Tuesday, April 23, 2013

By Ryan Deckert, Nik Blosser and J. David Zehntbauer

If what we strive for as a state is education over incarceration, now is the time for business leaders and elected officials to face Oregon's expensive public safety system with the same courage and forward-thinking that has made Oregon famous in the health care reform arena.

Oregon's prison population has grown by nearly 50% — to over 14,000 inmates in the last decade. Taxpayers now spend more than \$1.3 billion each biennium to pay for corrections. Leaders of large and small businesses across the state need to reexamine this expensive system and look for proven, cost-effective ways to slow this growth in incarceration that is draining more and more money away from other public safety and policy priorities.

Recent trends in corrections growth threaten our leadership position among the states and our ability to deliver citizens the best possible public safety results. The state projects our prison population will grow by an additional 2,200 beds in the next 10 years. This prison growth, fueled mostly by nonviolent offenders, will cost taxpayers an additional \$600 million for the construction of new prisons during this period.

To address these escalating and unsustainable costs, the Governor appointed the Commission on Public Safety, a group comprised of a bi-partisan group of legislators, business leaders and law enforcement. The Commission determined that although Oregon has led the nation in effective corrections policies, we are losing ground on some of these achievements over the past 10 years.

Specifically, a public safety system focused primarily on increased incarceration is less cost-effective than evidence-based, alternative options. Today, Oregon offenders are staying in prison longer than they have at any point in the last decade, despite a growing body of research that points to diminishing public safety returns of longer prison sentences. Some offenders are more likely to be successful when they are held accountable in community-based corrections programs; where a combination of accountability to the judicial system coupled with needed interventions like drug and alcohol treatment can be effectively implemented. Since 2000, 17 states making similar changes have reduced their incarceration rate and have also seen a drop in crime.

HB 3194 is the bill that encompasses the policy recommendations of the Commission on Public Safety. It represents the sound financial practices that successful Oregon businesses use: identifying smart ways to cut costs and reinvesting those savings into products that will bring a return on investment. HB 3194 finds savings through smart, evidence based, cost effective programs and reinvests those savings back into community-based programs proven to reduce recidivism, giving us a better return on our public safety investment. Oregon's public safety system can be more effective from a public policy and cost savings stand point by utilizing appropriate judicial discretion in sentencing, using cost-benefit analysis and risk assessment tools in crafting sentences and reducing recidivism.

Oregon needs to continue to create safe communities for business, and for our families, employees and customers. In order to continue on this path, Oregon must get smarter about how we punish, rehabilitate, and re-enter offenders into our society so they do not commit more crimes. Oregonians and our legislators should support the public safety reform package that is before the legislature in HB 3194.

Ryan Deckert is president of the Oregon Business Association. Nik Blosser is president of Celilo Group Media and chair of the Oregon Business Association Board of Directors. J. David Zehntbauer is a partner with Dunn Carney Allen Higgins & Tongue.

From the desk
of Rep. Jules Bailey