The Council of State Governments Justice Center held a staff briefing on Capitol Hill Oct. 11 on the Justice Reinvestment Initiatives in Ohio and North Carolina.

Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton and Rep. W. David Guice, chairman of the North Carolina House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on Justice and Public Safety, detailed how data-driven justice reinvestment processes led to the passage of landmark legislation in the two states. The briefing was cosponsored by the Pew Center on the States.

North Carolina

Just two years ago North Carolina’s prison population was projected to grow by 10 percent, or about 3,900 people, by 2020. To help state leaders understand and prepare for this growth, CSG Justice Center staff presented detailed data analyses to a bipartisan, inter-branch working group. Among other issues, the Justice Center found that more than half of prison admissions were people who had failed on probation.

The Justice Reinvestment Act was written to reduce recidivism by focusing supervision and treatment resources on higher-risk offenders, on whom they could have the greatest effect in lowering recidivism. The bill passed with near-unanimous bipartisan support in both houses and was signed into law on June 23.

As a result, in 2017, the prison population is expected to be nearly 5,000 beds lower than projected. That translates to $560 million in cumulative savings and averted costs ($267 million in avoided costs and $293 million in savings from reduced costs). These savings have positioned the state to reinvest more than $4 million annually (a 40 percent increase in spending) on additional community-based treatment programs to improve outcomes for people on community supervision.

Ohio

With Ohio’s criminal justice system facing similar pressures and policymakers working to address an $8 billion state budget deficit, the governor, chief justice and legislative leaders received justice reinvestment technical assistance from the CSG Justice Center. With a total population exceeding 51,000, state prisons were 33 percent over capacity—and projected to grow by 3,000 people by 2015.

Analyses prepared by the CSG Justice Center showed a considerable portion of prison population pressures can be attributed to people convicted of low-level property and drug offenses who served
short prison terms before being released to the community unsupervised. Presented with these key findings, a bipartisan, inter-branch working group worked with CSG Justice Center staff to design a 13-point policy framework. After policymakers translated the framework into legislation also containing policies previously introduced by state lawmakers, it passed with near-unanimous majorities in the House and Senate. Gov. John Kasich signed it into law on June 29.

It is estimated that the new law will enable Ohio to avert the prison population growth projected through 2015, thereby helping the state avoid an estimated $500 million in costs to construct and operate new prisons, and generate $78 million in marginal cost savings over this period. The new statute will ease prison crowding as the population gradually declines to levels last seen in 2007.

The CSG Justice Center’s Justice Reinvestment Initiative to address corrections spending and increase public safety is a partnership with the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States, with additional support to CSG from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice. These efforts have provided similar data-driven analyses and policy options to state leaders in 14 states.

For more information about the project, visit justicereinvestment.org [2].