Criminal Justice Reform Gains Momentum

By CSG Justice Center [1]
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Even as partisan tension increases in advance of the 2016 elections, national policymakers on both sides of the aisle can cite one area where many find broad agreement: The need for comprehensive criminal justice reform.

In Washington, D.C., growing momentum behind efforts to reform the criminal justice system has pushed the issue to the forefront of lawmakers’ agendas for the fall. For example, pressure has intensified to reauthorize federal funding for programs that support successful reentry of formerly incarcerated individuals. This momentum for change to the federal system reflects lessons learned from states where system innovations and improvements have made an impact on recidivism and other criminal justice outcomes over the past decade.

This summer, President Obama used high-profile events to stake his support for a major re-examination of the nation’s justice system. On July 16, he became the first sitting president to visit a U.S. federal prison, with a tour of the El Reno Federal Correctional Institution in Oklahoma, where he spoke with six people incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses. That same week, he commuted the sentences of 46 people convicted of similar nonviolent drug crimes.

In a major speech [2] on July 14 to the NAACP conference in Philadelphia, Obama said it was fundamentally important to prepare people returning to their communities after incarceration “to grab that second chance.”

The push by the president comes on the heels of bipartisan legislation introduced first by U.S. Sens. Rob Portman of Ohio and Patrick Leahy of Vermont, and then by U.S. Reps. Jim Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin and Danny K. Davis of Illinois. The Second Chance Reauthorization Act of 2015 would provide grants for education and career preparation; employment services; substance use and mental health treatment; housing; and other resources that people returning to the community after incarceration frequently need.

Lawmakers in states around the country have pursued ways to improve public safety, avert high costs related to recidivism and prison overcrowding, and reinvest in their justice systems. The federal moves owe much to the state approaches to success. Many state policymakers test and evaluate what works in their systems then expand the methods that yield the best results.

Last year, governors and congressional leaders held a briefing in Washington, D.C. to discuss how eight states reformed their corrections systems and improved recidivism outcomes.

The states, whose results were published in Reducing Recidivism: States Deliver Results by The Council of State Governments’ Justice Center and the National Reentry Resource Center, had different...
stories to tell. Across Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Wisconsin, officials pointed to many data-driven measures implemented with funding for a system-wide “Justice Reinvestment” analysis, and with support through the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs Second Chance Act to frontline re-entry service providers. The states saw declines of 6 to 18 percent in the numbers of people who returned to prison within three years of release.

As these states achieved lower recidivism rates for people released from prison, many also saw their overall crime and incarceration rates decline. For federal policymakers, these states showed that assessing people’s criminogenic risks and needs, providing treatment as needed, and delivering an appropriate level of supervision during probation and parole can lead to significant and sustainable results.

Many more states are taking similar steps to pursue a system-wide justice reinvestment analysis, thanks to a significant increase in funding this past year from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance.

If enacted, the Second Chance Reauthorization Act will extend programs funded by the earlier legislation that were found to be successful and expand its impact by adding nonprofit organizations to allowable grantees for programs promoting family-based substance abuse treatment and career training. To date, this legislation has 28 co-sponsors in the House and 15 co-sponsors in the Senate—15 Republicans, 27 Democrats and one independent.

Since 2009, nearly 600 grants have been awarded to entities, ranging from state and local government agencies to community-based organizations and other providers of vital services, in an attempt to reduce recidivism rates and support individuals in their local areas.

In a further sign that criminal justice reform is a growing priority for federal policymakers, House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte of Virginia on June 10 announced the launch of a Criminal Justice Initiative to evaluate proposals to reform the nation’s criminal justice system. “Prisoner re-entry is a key piece of any reform effort. I’m proud to be a co-sponsor of the Second Chance Reauthorization Act,” Goodlatte said.

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