

Proposed early-release bill smacks of common sense

Times Editorial Board

Everyone wants to be safe. That's why countless elections have been won or lost based on the public's perception of the candidate as "tough on crime."

And voters aren't satisfied to take a candidate's word for it. They want to hear a plan. (That's a truly commendable instinct that should be extended to fiscal claims as well). And for decades, those plans have generally been to up the ante on punishment of offenders.

First, because "lock 'em up" is a simple concept to articulate in a short stump speech. Second, because that solution is easier than providing mental health care, quality early childhood programs, solid K-12 education even in "bad" neighborhoods, affordable child care for working parents, drug treatment, diversion programs for at-risk youth, career training for low-level offenders and living wages.

Easier, although often not cheaper in the long run.

The result of this long tough-on-crime era has been this nation's disastrous and inequitable long-term prison sentences for relatively minor drug crimes, and three-strikes laws and mandatory minimums that leave little leeway for judges and prosecutors to adjust the punishment to fit the crime.

A bill introduced in the Minnesota House of Representatives this month by 42B Rep. Jamie Becker-Finn, DFL-Roseville, just might point the way out of this quagmire —without compromising safety and while saving the state a considerable amount of tax money.

HF 2349/SF2295, the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act, would align Minnesota with more than 30 other states where imprisoned people can earn their way to shorter prison sentences.

It would work like this: All offenders would be individually assessed upon intake to the state's corrections system. A plan is created with measurable goals and outcomes that can include substance abuse rehabilitation, training or other goals. If the offender meets them, their prison term or their time on supervised release is reduced by up to 17%.

The program is not for every offender. As the bill is written now, people convicted of first-, second- or third-degree murder would not be candidates, nor would anyone committing a crime for the benefit of a gang. People convicted of first-, second- or third-degree sex crimes with force would be ineligible, as would dangerous sex offenders, anyone who committed first-degree assault, anyone who used a firearm or other deadly weapon in some crimes, or anyone who attacks a police officer, corrections officer, judge or prosecutor. No one sentenced to life in prison will be able to earn a break.

One of the most encouraging facets of the proposal is who would be keeping watch to make sure things go well. The bill mandates the participation of a wide range of stakeholders to set the standards for earning early-release credits and, notably, to receive and review annual reports on the program's performance once implemented. The bill sagely demands accountability for equity of implementation among offenders of different races, ethnicities, and genders.

Who are those stakeholders? The bill demands that the commissioner of corrections work with the Minnesota County Attorney's Association, the Minnesota Board of Public Defense, the Minnesota Association of Community Corrections Act Counties, Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition, Violence-Free Minnesota, Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Minnesota Alliance on Crime, the Minnesota Sheriff's Association, Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association, and the Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association to establish the policy. Victims, too, will be involved in the process.

A similar, small-scale program here in Minnesota called the Challenge Incarceration Program already allows some offenders to earn early release. It has shown that such incentives work. And a similar Missouri program reduced its prison population by 18% in the first three years with no rise in recidivism, according to the DOC.

If those results could be replicated in Minnesota, there's little downside and the upside is substantial: Minnesota taxpayers could save \$10 million per year when it is fully implemented, according to a DOC estimate — or \$38 per person, per day of earned early release.

And then there are the less-measurable, but even more valuable advantages: Some offenders will come out of the system having built skills to reach goals and with better tools to turn their lives in a productive direction — another step toward safety for all of us. Some kids will spend less time visiting a parent behind prison walls. And people working toward early release are more likely to reconsider the impulses that endanger corrections officers, prison staff and fellow offenders.

The money saved by housing offenders for shorter periods of time would, backers say, go to victim support services, crime prevention, community-based correctional programs, and the state's general fund. We would advocate putting some of it toward resolving the state's admitted \$612 million maintenance backlog at state correctional facilities as well.

This bill smacks of common sense after long-term oversimplification of crime control has made an American citizen the most likely person in the world to be imprisoned — more likely to be an inmate than citizens of Russia, China, El Salvador, Rwanda or Cuba. We can do better.

— This is the opinion of the Times Editorial Board, which includes News Director Lisa Schwarz and Content Coach Anna Haecherl.