

Reintegration — An Important Part of Community Strength
By Senator Pete Campos

Data from the New Mexico Sentencing Commission shows that returning to the community is a difficult task that poses serious challenges for those who have been released from incarceration. More than 40% of inmates released between July 2007 and June 2015 were arrested again by June 30, 2017. The formerly incarcerated are likely to become stressed and anxious as they evaluate the barriers to overcome to establish a life "outside". These individuals must juggle housing, employment and re-learning how to communicate with the free world, all while rebuilding their lives.

To overcome policies and social norms that have stacked the cards against former wrongdoers, the character traits of strength, confidence and resiliency are required. The days and years that follow imprisonment are filled with many disappointments, struggles and physical and mental readjustments. Step by step, these individuals must try to piece together today's societal prerequisites, such as identification cards, bank accounts and health insurance.

To make the ascending hike to the public world even more steep and difficult, a stigma exists for those who have served time in a correctional facility. The pressure of numerous eyes observing the formerly incarcerated to detect any misstep creates a slope that may cause a minor slip to avalanche into charges that only apply to individuals on probation or parole. The Council of State Governments estimates that 53% of state prisoners and 68% of jail inmates enter correctional facilities with substance abuse issues. Additionally, the Legislative Finance Committee reports that drug use violations that remain unaddressed are frequently the cause of revocation of parole or supervised release.

I have found in my time as a trained counselor and legislator performing constituent services that most who have served time in a jail or prison want to be productive and law-abiding citizens. Unfortunately, that attitude can waver as the reality of prison stigma and collateral consequences assault the newfound freedom of former prisoners. However, if encouraged to do well and regain momentum, former prisoners can make significant positive contributions to the community.

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Encouraging signs do exist within our correctional facilities regarding community reentry preparation. Programs that teach a trade are promising and can allow for a much easier and more prosperous post-prison life. If the personal strength to overcome the remaining barriers endures, social contributions from former prisoners can include volunteering to educate youth on correcting a corrupted path or writing a book about their life experiences.

Some may say that prison is not an educational or full-time care center but, rather, a place to serve hard time and pay penance for crimes. Those people are right; however, the criminal justice system we have cultivated has overwhelmed the state's finances. The costs of care for elderly or otherwise health-challenged inmates who are no longer a threat to public safety are quickly increasing. Our precious resources will be squandered on fruitless prison systems while we could be planting seeds to mark the path for a prosperous future.

Investments in education, economic and outdoor development and promoting our state as a worldwide tourist destination are more proactive investments to both reduce crime and raise revenue. If we do not act to help reentry attempts succeed, every spare dollar we may receive in coming years could be consumed before our governor's education moonshot rocket can reach maximum velocity.

Undoubtedly, bad people exist in our society, in and out of prison, and we must remain vigilant. It is equally important though, that we support second-chance programs and efforts to reintegrate those who have served their time and are ready to move on and rediscover their lives.