

Public Safety Is Government's Number One Responsibility

By Senator Pete Campos

There's a lot of room for debate on the question of the proper role of government in New Mexico, but there can be no debate on whether government's top job is to protect its citizens from harm.

Whether at the national level, the state level or the local level, government's goal must be to prevent people who would do us harm from carrying out their plans, punish them when they are caught and help their victims recover. Government must also protect citizens from disasters, both large and small, and from illness and accidents.

No matter what one's personal political beliefs are, nearly everyone agrees with the proposition that by combining public resources—including money, equipment and personnel—we can do a better job of providing for our safety and well-being than if we work to do the same thing as individuals. Also, few, if any, would disagree with the proposition that protecting ourselves from harm is a worthy endeavor.

Providing for our collective well-being requires a multifaceted approach that includes using the expertise of both public safety and public health agencies. On the law enforcement side of the formula, we must concentrate on our police and sheriff's officers, corrections employees and judicial employees.

Our law enforcement officers, who are typically young men and women just beginning their careers, deserve to be paid the best salaries possible and be given the best safety equipment available. It is difficult to adequately compensate the men and women of law enforcement for the danger they place themselves in daily, performing tasks few of us would willingly choose to do and venturing into places few of us would dare to go. But we must try, and we should begin by boosting the salaries of our own New Mexico state police officers.

Legislation has been introduced this session to raise state police officers' salaries, a small but necessary step in the attempt to reward these officers for the jobs they do and to keep them from leaving for county and municipal departments or other careers. The bill would also require the legislative finance committee to recommend pay raises each year for state police to keep their salaries in line with those offered by top departments in the state.

Additionally, we should work to keep officers' families safe from retribution from criminals who were arrested by an officer who was just doing his or her job. Creating support networks and offering special training and counseling for officers' families should be considered.

Finally, combined regional dispatch centers bring greater efficiency to police, sheriff and emergency services agencies that jointly serve the public. The state must continue to work to consolidate dispatch centers so that more resources can be devoted to street-level law enforcement and so that greater cooperation can be instilled among our public safety agencies.

While we improve our law enforcement capabilities, we must also look at boosting our corrections capacity. We may not be ready to build more prisons, but we should consider expanding the prisons we have by adding cells. As we talk about toughening our criminal laws, limiting the ability of inmates to earn time off for good behavior and boosting our law enforcement capabilities, we must consider the impact those actions will have on our prisons. Frankly, it's fairly simple: if we arrest and convict more people and then keep them in prison longer, we're going to need more prison cells.

At the same time, we must support proactive programs to keep our youth away from a life of crime—and a life behind bars—and we must redouble our efforts to rehabilitate inmates who are eventually released, so that they can return to society as productive, law-abiding citizens. We must allow ex-inmates to earn decent wages and to participate in community activities, while ensuring that the public is properly protected.

This means spending more money on law enforcement, prisons and parole officers.

Of course, we must also be willing to ensure that our judges and juries work in the safest, most comfortable and most modern courtrooms possible. The highest level of security and comfort is essential to helping our judges and juries make the best decisions.

If we do not provide the best working environment possible, we take the risk of prompting judges and juries to make hasty, ill-conceived decisions. In other words, if we are to justifiably require that good citizens serve as judges and juries, we should be willing to provide them with proper facilities in which to do their work.