

New Mexico's legislative committees are working to address the crime wave plaguing our state. In true bipartisan fashion, legislators are reviewing and analyzing statistical and anecdotal information to make informed decisions to better address high crime rates in our largest city. If we are to take curtailing crime and building a safer state seriously, there will have to be a collaborative effort to build consensus. Whether we want to be or not, we are currently in the process of reform. Reform on this scale is not going to be fast, easy or cheap, in part because these are critically important decisions that affect every New Mexican.

The people and courts of New Mexico recognized that our criminal justice system is archaic and needs serious reform. The New Mexico Supreme Court has determined that a need exists to resolve cases more quickly in the Second Judicial District, but the Office of the Second Judicial District Attorney is struggling to keep up with imposed deadlines and massive caseloads. In 2016, voters decided by a landslide vote to reform the Constitution of New Mexico's section on bail. As a result, the courts had to quickly adopt an intake assessment that would work within the framework of the changes mandated by the people and the Supreme Court.

A smart approach to crime requires a contemporary big-data approach, not "wild-west-style" justice. Properly vetted one-time investments must be made now if real reform is on the horizon. Our aging prison system requires costly facility, security and technological upgrades. Improving data collection throughout the criminal justice process, from first contact with police to completion of a sentence and beyond, including recidivism, will help us all understand and study crime. Once we have data on who commits crimes and a better understanding of why, we can begin to assemble a long-term plan that addresses crime prevention as well as a sensible approach to bail and smart, consistent sentencing for those convicted of crimes. Before the legislature can consider serious reform, we must know where appropriations will be most effective, particularly in today's budget atmosphere. It is essential that proven outcomes, like drug courts, are supported and that the mudslinging and antiquated proposals stop. It is substantially more cost-effective and proven to reduce recidivism when the criminal justice system treats addiction and trains for employment rather than imprisons. Our prisons have become mental health asylums and centers for convicts to hone their illicit skills before returning to the streets.

Public defenders, district attorneys and courts agree that reform must continue. They are working together in each judicial district to streamline court processes. They are also meeting with legislative committees on criminal justice, justice reform and finance with an eye toward reform under the next gubernatorial administration. Next interim, the Criminal Justice Reform Subcommittee intends to begin work on a legislative packet to revamp the criminal justice system. Legislators are even discussing a complete rewrite of the Criminal Code to bring some consistency to our piecemeal sentencing statutes. Other ideas discussed include a safe communities task force, creating a new crime categorization scheme, early intervention, greater utilization of social services and collateral consequences.

Some members of the legislature believe that thorough reform cannot be achieved before 2019, when a new governor will be sworn in and a 60-day session will allow for consideration of bills without a message from the governor. Until a new era is ushered in, we must be patient and not reactionary to ensure that quality proposals are considered, vetted and not rushed through the legislative process under a shroud of darkness. As we reform this massive and critical system, we are going to experience growing pains as the committees and courts determine how to proceed. I must acknowledge that the courts are releasing an increased number of inmates on their own recognizance, but until we have a quality data-tracking system, it is impossible for us to know accurate details of how often or how many of those alleged offenders should have remained incarcerated. We must modernize our criminal justice system or else acknowledge that criminals remain ahead of the curve.