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Guest Columns

Overhauling criminal justice system of primary importance

By Sen. Pete Campos / Las Vegas Democrat

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As crime rates rise, one may surmise that criminals control our largest city. The last few elections have shown that the people of New Mexico are weary of anticipating their turn to be a victim. They are ready for criminal justice reform. Earlier this month, Albuquerque indicated by a wide margin in the mayoral race that the city is ready to embrace change and proven practices. Last November, voters statewide decided to amend the Constitution of New Mexico's section on bail to protect the indigent and detain dangerous criminals.

The Department of Public Safety reports that violent crime rates in New Mexico rose by nearly twice the national rate increase in 2016, vaulting us to the second-most-dangerous state. The Office of the Second Judicial District Attorney reports that, despite internal reform, the office struggles to persevere under increasing crime and court mandates. State and local agencies make notable efforts but continue to fall short of significant impacts. One approach that is certain to effect change is to increase street police presence; however, as an inevitable result, this further stresses the courts and district attorneys. Be mindful that, much like cars or computers, when upgrading one piece of the system other parts need upgrades to operate properly.

I hear the pleas to protect our communities and promise to work diligently to overhaul an inefficient and impractical system. Instituting a modernized plan to address crime will take time and adjustments. Until we thoroughly vet different ideas, there are common-sense measures that can be instituted. Most crimes are committed by males between their teens and age 30. If we can ensure they, along with their female peers, have access to and participate in work and creative expression, such as music or sports, there will be less time, desire and reason to act nefariously. The human psyche is fragile, particularly for youth and other vulnerable individuals. When opportunities and aspirations are limited, depression and other instabilities emerge that cause unpredictable behavior like criminal activity, drug use and suicide. If we can all go further to support one another, our society will grow to reflect the strengths gained through our collective struggle.

With New Mexico's crime rates, it is probable everyone is only one or two connections away from an alleged criminal – a child, parent, grandchild, niece, nephew or friend. I expect most individuals who are close to criminals do not believe that their friends or family members are morally corrupt. It is likely that the criminals in question are not evil-hearted people; rather, they struggle with some type of substance, behavioral or mental instability. We know these issues, along with poverty, are connected to the commission of most crimes, yet we continue to incarcerate the ill. We also know while people are imprisoned, these instabilities escalate. Additionally, inmates are likely to learn illicit skills as their only social interactions are with criminals.

As a state, we need to express more compassion in building our community. That's not to say crimes should go unpunished; rather, we have to address drivers of crime if we intend to prevent future infractions. There is a common sentiment criminal offenders do not deserve the rights of law-abiding citizens and should be held in less-than-desirable environments. My goal is to ensure that a balance is struck between restorative and punitive measures. Without this balance, our prisons will maintain their "revolving doors." Punishments should be demanding, but it is critical that preparations for societal re-entry include restoring the ability to work and helping released inmates to adapt socially. Bipartisan proposals, such as "ban the box," have helped to address one issue, but the collateral consequences of an arrest go beyond affecting employment. The Council of State Governments Justice Center reports a potential 680 collateral consequences in N.M. law that could negatively affect a person with an arrest or conviction.

In my research and experience, it is apparent immaturity and poor decisions negatively affect offenders' lives. More importantly, the impact is lasting. This is the very reason government branches and agencies should effectively coordinate in establishing victim and community healing. Our long-term goal is to forge a system that works. When implemented correctly, reform will reduce crime rates and revitalize communities that have been dismantled by misuse of our justice system. Beginning with the 2018 legislative session, we should look forward to bringing consistency to behavioral health funding that will alleviate stress on the courts, DAs and correctional facilities.

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