

The Washington Post

Saving money, saving lives

By *Newt Gingrich and Pat Nolan*

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With nearly all 50 states facing budget deficits, it's time to end business as usual in state capitols and for legislators to think and act with courage and creativity.

We urge conservative legislators to lead the way in addressing an issue often considered off-limits to reform: prisons. Several states have recently shown that they can save on costs without compromising public safety by intelligently reducing their prison populations.

We joined with other conservative leaders last month to announce the Right on Crime Campaign, a national movement urging states to make sensible and proven reforms to our criminal justice system - policies that will cut prison costs while keeping the public safe. Among the prominent signatories are Reagan administration attorney general Ed Meese, former drug czar Asa Hutchinson, David Keene of the American Conservative Union, John Dilulio of the University of Pennsylvania, Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and Richard Viguerie of ConservativeHQ.com. We all agree that we can keep the public safe while spending fewer tax dollars if we spend them more effectively.

The Right on Crime Campaign represents a seismic shift in the legislative landscape. And it opens the way for a common-sense

left-right agreement on an issue that has kept the parties apart for decades.

There is an urgent need to address the astronomical growth in the prison population, with its huge costs in dollars and lost human potential. We spent \$68 billion in 2010 on corrections - 300 percent more than 25 years ago. The prison population is growing 13 times faster than the general population. These facts should trouble every American.

Our prisons might be worth the current cost if the recidivism rate were not so high, but, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, half of the prisoners released this year are expected to be back in prison within three years. If our prison policies are failing half of the time, and we know that there are more humane, effective alternatives, it is time to

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fundamentally rethink how we treat and rehabilitate our prisoners.

We can no longer afford business as usual with prisons. The criminal justice system is broken, and conservatives must lead the way in fixing it.

Several states have shown that it is possible to cut costs while keeping the public safe. Consider events in Texas, which is known to be tough on crime. Conservative Republicans joined with Democrats in adopting incentive-based funding to strengthen the state's probation system in 2005. Then in 2007, they decided against building more prisons and instead opted to enhance proven community corrections approaches such as drug courts. The reforms are forecast to save \$2 billion in prison costs over five years.

The Lone Star State has already redirected much of the money saved into community treatment for the mentally ill and low-level drug addicts. Not only have these reforms reduced Texas's prison population - helping to close the state budget gap - but for the first time there is no waiting list for drug treatment in the state. And crime has dropped 10 percent from 2004, the year before the reforms, through 2009, according to the latest figures available, reaching its lowest annual rate since 1973.

Last year we both endorsed corrections

reforms in South Carolina that will reserve costly prison beds for dangerous criminals while punishing low-risk offenders through lower-cost community supervision. The legislation was a bipartisan effort with strong support from liberals, conservatives, law enforcement, the judges and reform advocates. The state is expected to save \$175 million in prison construction this year and \$60 million in operating costs over the next several years.

Some people attribute the nation's recent drop in crime to more people being locked up. But the facts show otherwise. While crime fell in nearly every state over the past seven years, some of those with the largest reductions in crime have also lowered their prison population. Compare Florida and New York. Over the past seven years, Florida's incarceration rate has increased 16 percent, while New York's decreased 16 percent. Yet

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the crime rate in New York has fallen twice as much as Florida's. Put another way, although New York spent less on its prisons, it delivered better public safety.

Americans need to know that we can reform our prison systems to cost less and keep the public safe. We hope conservative leaders across the country will join with us in getting it right on crime.

Newt Gingrich was speaker of the House from 1995 to 1999 and is the founder of American Solutions. Pat Nolan was Republican leader of the California State Assembly from 1984 to 1988 and is a vice president of Prison Fellowship, a Christian ministry to prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families that also works on justice reform.

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