




May 19, 2009


Governor's Ex-Offender Task Force:


A Good First Step Toward Public Safety and Reducing Prison Costs

■ BY LOUISA B. WARREN – NC JUSTICE CENTER, NC SECOND CHANCE ALLIANCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

 **GOV. BEVERLY PERDUE IS TO BE COMMENDED** for establishing a new task force to examine barriers and recommend policy solutions for those coming out of the prison system.

 **ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO RE-ENTRY** is a bipartisan issue that can make communities safer, cut costs and help those who have paid their debt to society.

 **NORTH CAROLINA LEGISLATORS SHOULD CONSIDER** several available policy options that can help fix our current approach. Recent experience from other states can be a guide for best practices.

OTHER STATES OFFER A ROADMAP TO ADDRESSING BARRIERS FACING EX-OFFENDERS AND PERSONS WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS.

Earlier this month, Gov. Beverly Perdue established a new task force to examine barriers faced by those coming out of the prison system -- and recommend policy solutions. The governor is to be commended for creating the StreetSafe Task Force to Reduce Repeat Offenders. It couldn't come at a better time, and it affords North Carolina an opportunity to promote public safety while saving valuable budget dollars.

The initiative will bring together a diverse set of partners, including faith-based organizations, non-profits, local and state government agencies, and business leaders to develop a plan to reduce recidivism and reintegrate offenders back into their communities.

Now is an opportunity for us to think carefully about how to move forward. Experiences from other states offer a valuable roadmap. Addressing barriers to re-entry is a bipartisan issue that can make communities safer, cut costs and offer those who have paid their debts to society a second chance.

This is necessary because the current system is simply not working. The cycle of incarceration and re-incarceration puts our public safety at risk, drains our state's resources, and wastes the potential of those who have paid their debts to society.

Because this issue affects so many families in North Carolina, a diverse coalition has already formed around ex-offender re-integration. The NC Second Chance Alliance came together earlier this year to back a comprehensive plan for examining

and addressing the significant barriers facing those coming out of the prison system, including housing, employment, and discrimination. The coalition has over 70 organization members from across the state.

The NC Second Chance Alliance has brought together law enforcement officials, advocacy organizations, service providers, faith-based organizations, community leaders and interested citizens. This shows how the ex-offender issue can unite people across political party lines in order to serve common interests.

Those common interests include:

- **FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY.** The state's budget shortfall raises questions about how

we most effectively allocate resources. When it costs approximately \$80,000 to construct just one new prison bed, we need to think more creatively of ways to stem our prison population growth. Reintegrating ex-offenders back into their communities, thus preventing recidivism, is a critically important part of this.

Rather than spending inordinate amounts on prison construction and to house offenders - it costs \$23,000 to incarcerate an individual per year of confinement - we should focus on effectively converting those offenders into ex-offenders.

- **CRIME PREVENTION.** Almost all incarcerated individuals will eventually be released back into society. Roughly two-thirds of those will be arrested again within three years. But five years after release, it's a different story. At that point, there is no difference in arrest rates between former offenders and citizens who have never once been in trouble with the law.

As Greenville Chief of Police William Anderson, a supporter of the NC Second Chance Alliance, has said: "There is a critical period after release where a former offender stands at a crossroads. We have to make criminal behavior unattractive by making sure there are more productive opportunities available, like education and employment. The opportunity to be integrated back into a community reduces crime."

- **SECOND CHANCES.** Planning for ex-offenders gives people who have paid their debt to society a fair chance. Making sure former offenders are able to be reintegrated into society isn't just the best crime prevention policy there is, it's the right thing to do.

Thankfully, some legislative work toward these goals has already been done. Governors and legislatures in at least one dozen states have established statewide councils to address prisoner reentry.

In North Carolina, we can get a head start on solving our problems by learning from their examples - and by supporting productive legislation that has already been introduced here.

Future research into the problems ex-offenders face is necessary. In addition to Gov. Perdue's new task force, Rep. Garland Pierce and Sen. Ed Jones have also put forward study bills, HB 527 and SB 496.

Some best policy practices and options to consider:

- ***Ensure that criminal record databases are kept up to date and accurate.***
Expunging a criminal record does not always mean a clean start, since criminal records databases are kept by a variety of different government bodies and also by private companies. SB 262, introduced by Sen. Doug Berger, passed the Senate recently and is a good first step forward for addressing criminal record databases. This important reform now needs action in the House.
- ***Provide vocational training and educational opportunities*** within prison and upon release to equip ex-offenders with job-training. In Texas, their study commission - led by Republicans - found that expanding capacity of treatment and diversion programs would lead to \$451 million in projected savings over the next two years alone.

This last example shows that this is not a partisan issue, and highlights another opportunity. The Council on State Governments, a bipartisan national non-profit, assists state policymakers in charting the safe and successful re-entry of prisoners to the community. With a demonstration of bipartisan commitment to the issue, the Council will consider coming in to work with a state. North Carolina's leaders should pursue this.

Gov. Perdue took a much-needed first step on the issue of ex-offender integration into society. To build safer communities and a brighter financial future, we should continue along this road.