

SNG-Prison not for everyone-12-15-14

Prison not for everyone

By Jim Nowlan

In the 1990s, I once co-taught a college course in history at the Henry Hill prison in Galesburg. I vividly recall that after class the first evening, a young, slender blonde fellow came up to me with a desperate look in his eyes.

“Are you a lawyer? (No) Well, anyway, please help me get out of here!” the young man pleaded. There was nothing I could do.

At the time, Illinois prisons were basically run by the gangs. That is no longer the case, I am told, but if you squeeze 49,000 Illinois inmates into space for 32,000, as the state does, there is a lot more opportunity for the bad guys to teach the new guys the wrong ways to live life.

Not much good goes on in prison, and education programs have been cut way back because of state budget problems.

As you have probably read elsewhere, the U.S. incarcerates way more people than any country in the world, including China and Russia, more than 700 per 100,000 population.

John Maki wants to change all that. John is the very bright, high-energy leader of the John Howard Association, an Illinois-based prison reform group.

Maki likes to quote the line that we should imprison those we are afraid of, not those we are mad at. And for many of those in prison, Maki thinks we should shorten the sentences.

“If the outcomes are no different for a person who serves 12 years than if he served 24 years, why keep him in prison at \$22,000 a year for a dozen more years,” he observes.

In 1974, Illinois had 6,000 in our prisons, now we have almost 50,000, many more than the nation of Australia (39,000), which has three times our state population. If human nature has changed that much in 40 years, our society is even worse off than I imagined.

Maki and his reform group would like us to focus on outcomes rather than on how much we spend at the front-end.

Basically, John Maki would like to divert many non-violent offenders from prison to local mental health counseling and drug and alcohol abuse treatment. This is what we have done for juvenile offenders, whose numbers in prison have been halved in recent years.

To do this, Maki would “de-felonize” drug possession for low-level amounts. He would reclassify possession from a Class 4 felony to a misdemeanor.

Maki would also replace mandatory minimum and “truth in sentencing” laws (must serve 85 percent of sentence), as he says those guidelines have the opposite of their intended effect, because judges often accept negotiated pleas to lesser offenses.

The prison reformer also says we need to know much more about our prison population, that is, how many have mental illness or are likely to recommit crimes, for example. He says we know next to nothing now.

Maki also says we have to commit to build a capacity at the local level to provide the counseling and treatment he calls for. In other words, reducing prison numbers will not reduce state costs, certainly not at first.

Law enforcement tends to oppose reducing drug possession to a misdemeanor. I had highly respected former Galesburg police chief John Schlaf in a course I taught at Knox College this past term. He said as a beat cop he had seen too much of the evil drugs do to people.

Some prosecutors say that offenders often need the threat of incarceration to carry through with their treatment programs.

[Illinois should not repeat the mistakes of the past. In the 1970-80s, there was a movement across the nation and in Illinois to close many of the “insane asylums” and “schools” for the mentally disabled. Many of these places were little more than warehouses to keep the populations out of sight of polite society.

[The idea was to transfer these people to community-based facilities where they could be cared for in more humane settings. Unfortunately, too often the warehouses were emptied but not enough capacity was ever developed at the local level to care for them.

[As a result, Cook County (Chicago) Sheriff Tom Dart has declared that his sprawling jail is the largest mental health institution in the nation.]

I recommend the following:

Reduce low-level possession of marijuana and maybe other drugs to a misdemeanor but require drug treatment for those who need it, and then to prison if they fail to complete their drug treatment programs.

To build capacity at the local level, contract with the faith-based organizations that are strong in many minority communities to provide some of the needed services.

Finally, collect data on individual prisoners so that we know what we are working with.

A human is a terrible thing to waste; maybe some are beyond redemption, but in my teaching at Henry Hill I saw some real diamonds in the rough who could be saved.