



The direction of our correctional institutions will depend on finding workable solutions that provide protection for us all.

Improving Corrections Through Legislation

By Jerrauld C. Jones

Judge

Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court
Norfolk, Va.

Corrections professionals have long grappled with the issues raised for discussion in this edition of *Corrections Today*. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, looking back on almost three years as director of the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, I have had countless opportunities to talk with professionals in state government or at the local level on legislative and judicial issues and their impact on our juvenile justice population.

In Virginia, we have initiated a concentrated effort to positively influence juvenile detention reform and disproportionate minority contact, just a few of the topics on which our thoughtful authors have provided insight. Frankly, it is difficult to elevate any of these articles in terms of importance over another. They all have a significant impact on the population corrections professionals are dedicated to serving. However, I will start by noting juvenile detention reform as a central issue most of us are facing today, if for no other reason than it is the subject of much discussion. States are making significant effort toward its implementation because the pendulum is swinging back from the early 1990s, when the focus of corrections was more punishment oriented.

The articles in this issue are, I think, a reflection of this movement back to the center, where we are rightly focused on the needs of the population in our care, as much as we are

focused on public safety issues pertaining to confinement. In Virginia, for example, we are examining the high rate of preadjudicated local detention and the costs it imposes on our system. We are trying to do something about it through our partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The initiative under way requires collaboration between intake, probation and parole services, the judiciary, law enforcement, prosecutors, defense attorneys, schools, social service agencies, secure detention homes and community-based provider agencies. Each locality is expected to use data to analyze its current detention practices, identify areas for improvement, develop and implement changes in policy and practice, and then monitor progress.

Of course, a part of the detention reform case involves a review of disproportionate minority confinement. This is a cutting-edge issue, even for those states that do not have large minority populations. Reducing it takes an honest effort, and corrections professionals must try to make as many race-neutral decisions as possible at each decision point in the judicial process, starting at intake.

I support the Federal Prison Rape Elimination Act, which speaks to the mandate for adequate and safe conditions in our nation's prisons. A sentence of confinement should not be a license to become a victim in this country. It is not the American way.

The Prison Rape Elimination Act stands for this, and all professionals in the business should applaud it and work to see that it becomes more than just a statement in our institutions. Let us do all we can to see it become a day-to-day reality.

We spend billions of dollars incapacitating offenders by locking them up. We could do a better job fighting crime if we used more of those dollars to help offenders get the necessary work skills in prison to break the cycle of criminality. We need to push for more reentry skills training, especially for nonviolent offenders. In Virginia, the Legislature passed a bill that authorizes the Department of Juvenile Justice to create work and educational release programs for juveniles committed to the custody of the state.

In what I think is one of the great injustices in this time, Virginia, like cities and states across the country, has increasingly come to rely on the justice system, whether it is for adults or youths, to care for individuals with mental illness. Often our jails become surrogate mental hospitals. This country must devote the resources to establish an adequate, nonsecure mental health system.

These are but a few of the issues that corrections professionals, citizens, political leaders, businesses and others should focus upon. The direction of our correctional institutions will depend on finding workable solutions that provide protection for us all. ♦