



LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERS

To Reduce Crime & Incarceration

March 22, 2017

Hon. John A. Alario Jr.
Louisiana State Senate
900 North Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

Hon. Taylor F. Barras
Louisiana House of Representatives
900 North Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

RE: Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force Recommendations

Dear President Alario, Speaker Barras and Honorable Members of the Louisiana Legislature:

As members of Louisiana's law enforcement community, we write in support of recommendations (outlined below) put forth in the Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force Report. Our experience has shown us that targeted criminal laws are critical to enhancing public safety. We appreciate your leadership on the important criminal justice issues facing our state today.

First and foremost, our obligation as law enforcement is to enhance public safety. We have dedicated our careers to fighting crime and have seen firsthand the toll that lawbreaking takes on communities. We do not hesitate to lock up and punish violent individuals who threaten the safety of Louisiana communities. However, we have learned much during our tenures about how to best protect the public. Public safety does not come from locking up every offender. Rather, it comes from smart, targeted policies that lock up the *right* offenders.

It's no secret that when it comes to our prison system, our state is an outlier. Our incarceration rate is almost double the national rate. Louisiana incarcerates more people per capita than any other state – including neighboring states of Alabama, Mississippi and Oklahoma. Not surprisingly, this is enormously expensive. As you know, in FY 2017, our state spent \$625 million on adult corrections.

Rather than punishing the most serious and dangerous criminals, much of our costly prison space is being filled with low-level offenders -- many of whom face mental health and addiction issues. Eighty-one percent of the people admitted to prison in Louisiana in 2015 committed non-violent offenses. Among newly sentenced prisoners in 2015, five of the top ten most common crimes were drug offenses. Our prisons and jails are ill-equipped treatment centers and without proper treatment, when people are released they are, at best, no better off than when they went in – and often worse.

Not surprisingly, the Task Force found that one in three people released from Louisiana prisons are incarcerated again within three years. This wastes resources and diverts law enforcement from proactively preventing crime, making us all less safe.ⁱ

We must hold people accountable for lawbreaking and we must keep our communities safe. But to improve public safety, we cannot rely solely on incarceration. Rather, we need to focus our correctional, law enforcement and prosecutorial resources on finding and punishing the most violent offenders, while diverting those more effectively served by other proven means outside the prison system.

We believe reforms proposed by the Louisiana Justice Reinvestment Task Force would be a significant step towards reducing crime, our prison population, and incarceration in our state. Specific recommendations that will help achieve this goal are:

- Expanding alternatives to incarceration through increasing probation and drug court eligibility;
- Revising certain low-level drug and property offenses to better target punishment to those that pose the greatest threat to our communities;
- Reinvesting a portion of the savings back into the criminal justice system to support the development of evidence-backed prison alternatives and recidivism reduction programs.

We know from experience that we can reduce crime and punish offenders appropriately without relying on excessive and arbitrary punishments. We believe the recommendations outlined above represent an important step that will put Louisiana on track towards accomplishing this.

We applaud your attention to this critical issue facing our state and our nation. We look forward to continuing to work with you to strengthen our justice system and make Louisiana safe.

Respectfully yours,

Ronal Serpas
Former Police Superintendent, New Orleans, Louisiana
Chairman, Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime and Incarceration

Donald Washington
Former U.S. Attorney, Western District of Louisiana

ⁱ See LOUISIANA JUSTICE REINVESTMENT TASK FORCE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS (2017).