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A smart new investment in crime prevention

BY PETER J. BARNES JR.

New Jersey is about to make a new public safety investment that promises to put more law enforcement officers on the streets while providing an estimated net savings of \$16.2 million over the next two fiscal years. As a lifelong law enforcement professional, I see this plan as long overdue and a sound investment in preventing crimes and ensuring the safety of families and communities.

This investment will include two residential assessment centers to target technical parole violators — parolees who have not committed a new crime or substantially threatened public safety but have simply violated the terms of parole supervision.

Currently, a technical parole violator is held in a county jail for several weeks while awaiting a hearing by the state Parole Board. Under the new proposal, a number of technical parole violators will be immediately locked down in one of the assessment centers. They will be subject to an intensive barrage of clinical assessments for up to 30 days to determine the parolee's problems and risk areas — aspects of the parolee's life that, untreated, could lead to new crimes.

The assessment will help the Parole Board make

decisions about the parolee's continued supervision and treatment. For example, it will help officers determine whether to subject the parolee to specific types of mental health or addiction counseling. It will also inform decisions as to whether the board should impose a curfew or send a parole violator back to prison.

In the fiscal year that ended last June, some 2,400 parolees returned to prisons and jails for non-violent, technical parole violations that did not warrant new criminal charges. It cost the state \$66.9 million to incarcerate these parole violators. Most technical violators are charged with failure to report to a parole officer, failure to obtain the officer's approval for a change of address or with low-level, drug-related technical violations. Such behaviors are consistent with relapses in addiction and indicate that increased supervision and targeted treatment are an appropriate law enforcement response.

The new proposal contained in the governor's budget, will fill a gap in New Jersey's re-entry efforts, which help parolees become law-abiding citizens. It will intensify parole supervision and the provision of specific, targeted treatment programs for about one-third of the state's nonviolent technical parole violators each year.

In New Jersey and throughout America, public

safety realities are leading to a re-examination of the ways we incarcerate criminals and the ways we work to reduce recidivism.

In February, the Pew Center on the States released the results of its extensive study of incarceration in America. For the first time in history, more than one in 100 Americans is behind bars, "a fact that significantly impacts state budgets without delivering a clear return on public safety," according to the Pew report. While states spend \$38 billion more on corrections than 20 years ago, "the national recidivism rate remains virtually unchanged, with about half of released inmates returning to jail or prison within three years," the report said.

Fortunately, states like New Jersey are finding effective solutions. These solutions recognize that most prison inmates will eventually be released and that public safety is best served when we invest in tough, workable programs that help ex-prisoners turn away from crime.

Many inmates leave prison poorly equipped to succeed in the community. Many lack job skills and experience and may not know how to present themselves during a job interview. Many have problems related to addiction or mental health.

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