



Policy Brief, No. 1
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The heaviest economic burden of untreated substance abuse and mental illness falls on state and local governments. The Governor, state legislators, mayors and county commissioners hold critical keys to reprioritizing where we spend our tax dollars and implementing cost effective solutions to the substance abuse and mental health crisis.

This month, the Department of Corrections held a Reentry Summit to emphasize the need to reduce barriers for offenders trying to reintegrate back into their communities and improve the recidivism rate. In fiscal year 2006-07, Florida released 35,377 inmates from its state prisons. Unfortunately, many of these ex-offenders leave Florida's prison system only to return a short time later many due to substance abuse and mental health issues. With a current recommitment rate (those returning to prison after three years) of 33%, the Department of Corrections estimates that over 11,000 of the inmates released will return to Florida's prison system.

The Corporation was represented at the Reentry Summit mentioned in the editorial by Judges May and Speiser.

The Governor's budget for fiscal year 2008-2009 recommended an additional \$30 million in community substance abuse treatment in order to save \$350 million in additional prison beds by reducing recidivism. The Corporation strongly endorsed this approach in its 2007 annual report, *Road to Recovery* (www.samhcorp.org). The 2008 Legislature, however, did not concur with the Governor's recommendation and instead spent \$400 million on new prison construction.

The Corporation also advocated for increased funding for the Criminal Justice, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Reinvestment Matching Grant which supports long-term collaborative partnerships within counties to reduce the number of individuals with substance abuse and mental health issues entering the criminal justice system. Currently, 23 counties in Florida have received funding under the program. The 2008 Legislature did not recommend new funding for the matching grant program.

Representatives of the Corporation board and Florida Partners in Crisis met with the editorial board staff of the Tallahassee Democrat in January to review the Corporation's 2007 annual report.

The editorial below appeared in the Tallahassee Democrat on June 18, 2008. It echoes many of the Corporation's recommendations that investment in substance abuse and mental health treatment saves costly state forensic beds, prisons, and child welfare expenditures. Timely and effective treatment can also impact high school graduation rates since 50 percent of children with serious emotional disturbances drop out of high school.

Tallahassee Democrat on June 18, 2008

Our Opinion: Failure to invest in people has long-term costs

Two unrelated events Tuesday illustrate the socioeconomic shortsightedness of providing public services on the cheap and treating many people as throwaways instead of as potentially productive citizens.

The first came in the form of a news release from the Alliance for Excellent Education, which said that, if the dropouts from Florida's Class of 2008 had stayed in school and earned diplomas, the economy of the Sunshine State could have enjoyed an additional \$25.3 billion in wages, taxes and productivity over those former students' lifetimes.

The organization is a national policy and advocacy organization that promotes secondary-school reform and seeks changes that will help every child in America graduate from high school. In an effort to explain the price we pay as a nation for school dropouts, the alliance reiterated what so many others have explained in the past.

Because dropouts earn almost \$10,000 less annually than those who earn a high-school diploma, their lower income translates into less purchasing power and lower tax receipts. In addition, educational failure frequently results in more public spending for social services.

"Each class of high-school dropouts damages the economy," said Bob Wise, president of the alliance and former governor of West Virginia. "If candidates running for federal office are truly committed to saving the nation's economic future, they must commit to saving America's high schools. The best economic stimulus package is to increase the number of students who earn a high school diploma."

Is Florida listening?

That should resonate here in Florida, which has the sixth-lowest graduation rate in the nation. Despite some progress in the past several years, Florida's commitment to excellence in public education historically has been more talk than walk.

The consequence is unrealized human and economic potential — coincidentally, the same topic that Florida Department of Corrections Secretary Walt McNeil tackled in his address Tuesday on the successful re-entry of ex-offenders into their communities.

Mr. McNeil said pouring billions into prison construction, coupled with inadequate spending in mental health, job training, substance abuse and basic education, was a recipe for failure.

The former chief of the Tallahassee Police Department and ex-secretary of the Department of Juvenile Justice has witnessed the results firsthand. "Lock 'em up and throw away the key" may win votes for politicians, but it's financially unsustainable public policy — and questionable social policy.

"It's been proven that it doesn't work," Mr. McNeil said at a conference on the restoration of civil rights for former inmates. "It only increases crime and it increases the burden on our taxpayers."

Florida has more than 97,000 people behind bars and is planning to build five more prisons. Incarcerating criminal offenders is necessary public policy, of course. Public safety is the first responsibility of government.

But policymakers should seriously examine whether it doesn't make more sense to expand alternatives to prison, especially for nonviolent offenders, and to improve rehabilitation efforts for inmates who have a respectable chance to redeem themselves.

The wisest strategy, of course, is prevention. That comes by way of strong families, good schools and decent jobs.