

Persuasive Speech: Oklahoma Prison Sentencing Reform

Dustin Lee

Today I am here to talk to you about a group of people many might say are undeserving members of our society. These are men and women who have put their own interests, wants and desire above all others and now these people have to pay their debt to society. Unfortunately that debt is financially paid for by the taxpaying citizens of Oklahoma. To paint a clearer picture, according to the Oklahoma Department of Corrections Oklahoma is ranked 1st in the number of women incarcerated, 5th for men and 3rd all together and our prisons are constantly running at 96% and/or above occupancy. (DOC Executive Communications, 2011) The state of Oklahoma currently has over 26,000 incarcerated men and women. Many of them are nonviolent offenders and less than ten percent are serving life sentences. According to the PEW Center of the States Oklahoma incarcerated 500 more people last year than were released. (Pew Center on the States, 2010) Oklahoma is the 48th in teacher pay, and we are annually increasing the amount we spend locking people away, constantly reaching amounts of almost half a billion dollars. This is not going unnoticed, and our best chance at prison reform has become the focus of many Oklahoma State Representatives. I'm here to tell you that there is a better way to handle these convicted felons currently locked away in the 30 plus state, federal and county correctional facilities. I will show you flaws in our current system's approach to punishment, and show you how now is our best opportunity of solving this crisis as well as a solution to the over population of nonviolent offenders.

The first obstacle to our prison overpopulation problem stems from the current sentencing time of prisoners. Our governing body is trying to alleviate the tension created by prison overcrowding by making changes in sentencing, possibly calling for release of thousands of

nonviolent offenders. As this does seem to be a short term solution to the problem, Sean Murphy pointed out in May of 2011 *AP Regional State Report* on the same day the Oklahoma Senate approved a proposal by House Speaker Kris Steele to increase the use of electronic monitoring and community sentencing for low-risk offenders as a way to reduce Oklahoma's prison population, the State Senate also overwhelmingly approved a measure that would authorize penalties of up to life in prison sentence for a first offense nonviolent drug charge. (Murphy, 2011) Why would state lawmakers create a way to aid and hinder the release and incarceration of nonviolent offenders? One lawmaker in Murphy's article, Sen. Richard Lerblance, stated his reasoning for this decision

"It's just the mindset up here, and it's been beaten into these new senators and representatives that you cannot be soft on crime." (Murphy, 2011)

If the current mindset is to find a way to incarcerate more nonviolent offenders replacing the ones who were released to ease overcrowding than I suggest a change in mindset. Increasing sentencing time on nonviolent drug offenders is adding to the current problem. In an April of 2011 *Journal Record of Oklahoma* (*The Journal of Public Record*, 2011), in 2008 the Justice Department noticed prisoners not receiving proper medical care due to overcrowding. Considering our overpopulation problems it seems reasonable to construct another prison. One such solution has been sidelined, as County Engineer Stacy Trumbo said the \$350 million jail project won't be put up for a vote until the federal Election cycle possibly leading into 2013. Federal officials have agreed on an October 2014 deadline for resolving the problem, and if a resolution is not met, the Feds will force it through regardless of residents' support: An aggressive, three-year property tax would be instituted to pay for the fixes, which would be more painful than a sales tax favored by commissioners. (*The Journal of Public Record*, 2011)

Relying on the current "Jail Project", waiting to put up a vote to build a new prison and make repairs to current structures is not going to solve our prison crisis. The best way to solve this problem is by trying a new way of determining sentencing and reaffirming the State Correctional Facility as a rehabilitative institution than a detention center. In the June 26th, 2011 *Tulsa World*, Julie Delcour announced a partnership with... "Council of State Governments the Pew Center on the States and the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance to analyze data to determine the effectiveness of public safety and corrections policies. Everything about the prison system gets examined, including how the state supervises those thousands of inmates released from prison and why those who need supervision often aren't getting it once released." (Delcour, 2011)

We are finally getting a chance to reform our Prison system, and the best solution I have seen for Prison Reform is to create rehabilitation programs that will provide alternatives to nonviolent drug offenders. A manageable concept was produced in a September 2010 article in the *Journal Record of Oklahoma City*. State Rep. Pat Ownbey and Mental Health Commissioner Terri White agreed that taxpayer dollars would be better spent on drug court and mental health court for nonviolent offenders arrested on possession charges. Prison costs \$48 a day, compared to \$40 a day for drug court and mental health court. Figures released by the *Journal Record of Oklahoma City* show incarceration costs at more than \$19,000 per inmate, while treatment programs – such as the drug court program – cost only about \$5,400 per participant. With the re-arrest rate of drug court participants is 23.5 percent, compared to 54 percent of those incarcerated. White adds

“Those receiving treatment had high rates of employment, higher monthly incomes and were more likely to be taking care of their own children.” Data from the Department of Corrections officials supports White’s claim. Both White and Ownbey support a proposal of \$95 million that would intercept people with mental health and substance abuse problems to receive treatment before they are incarcerated. The result, White said, would create a net gain savings of about \$233 million in three years. “The state would continue to see approximately \$123 million in savings each additional year beyond that three-year period,” she said. (The Journal of Public Record, 2010)

The reason this proposal failed? No one wants to appear soft. Our current system is failing to see over sentencing as a problem. But with inclusion of Pew Center on the States and other organizations, our prison system will get the attention it deserves, as well as a system that earns the right to be called a Correctional Facility. For those who are still don’t think our prison system needs to be reformed, let me leave you with this; for those of you who are currently or are planning to raise a family here through the next 10 to 20 years, do you want them to be brought up with the same broken system, or do you want to give them something better.

Bibliography

Delcour, J. (2011, June 26). Prison Changes. Tulsa, Oklahoma, US.

DOC Executive Communications. (2011). *Today an Inmate, Tomorrow our Neighbor*. Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Department of Corrections.

Murphy, S. (2011, May). AP Regional State Report. Oklahoma City, Ok, USA.

Pew Center on the States. (2010). *Prison Count 2010*. Pew Center on the States.

The Journal of Public Record. (2011, April). Officials: Vote on Oklahoma County jail must wait. *the Journal of Record of OklahomaCity* . Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA.

The Journal of Public Record. (2010, September 30). Treatment Versus Prison: Oklahoma Study Examines Drug Abuse, Prisons and Rehabilitation. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA: AP.