

## Savings Eyed in Changes in Criminal Justice

Associated Press, November 30, 2014

**DETROIT (AP)** – Michigan lawmakers are considering changes in the state’s criminal justice system, including a fairer path to parole for prisoners and a data-driven effort to rewrite sentencing guidelines for certain crimes.

The case is being made by a western Michigan Republican, Rep. Joe Haveman of Holland, who believes millions of dollars could be saved in the years ahead without threatening public safety. The four-bill package could get a vote as early as this week.

“What could be the outcome of having less people in prison? Of having less crime? Of having revenue that we could spend on schools and roads instead of locking people up?” Haveman said. “We cannot continue to imprison citizens for longer and longer sentences with no positive outcomes.”

Few people would oppose putting more money into roads and schools. But even a perception that officials are being soft on criminals in exchange can be a spoiler. Haveman has been working with prosecutors, judges, sheriffs and defense lawyers on a compromise that satisfies many parties.

“We’ll get the votes in the House. We’re going to get something done,” he said in an interview.

Haveman cautioned that many provisions still were being drafted before Thanksgiving, but he said there’s a consensus that the parole process needs more transparency. Prisoners would know what’s required to be released after serving the minimum sentence. The parole board likely would be required to disclose more information about why parole was denied.

“Under current law, the parole board’s discretion is whatever it wants it to be,” said Margaret Raben, a defense lawyer involved in the negotiations.

“There are hundreds, maybe even thousands of people, still in prison despite the fact that they’re past” their earliest release date, she said.

Indeed, the Corrections Department pegged it at 5,485 in April. A number of factors can affect parole decisions, especially conduct in prison.

Attorney General Bill Schuette is urging lawmakers to postpone any action in December, despite Haveman's efforts to craft the bills with input from key people in the criminal justice system. Schuette warns that public safety could be compromised.

Separately, Haveman's bills would create a commission to analyze the impact of Michigan's sentencing guidelines on jails, prisons and courts. The 15-member commission would recommend changes in the guidelines, especially for crimes that aren't as serious as violent ones. A similar group was disbanded in 2002.

After peaking at 51,554 in 2007, Michigan's prison population consistently dropped until 2012. There were 43,704 inmates at the end of 2013. The House Fiscal Agency said \$20 million can be saved for every 1,000 prison beds that are retired.

"I don't see immediate money savings" from the legislation, Haveman said. "You don't save significant amounts of money until you're able to close a facility. That's done when population is down significantly."

Muskegon County prosecutor D.J. Hilson, who has participated in the negotiations, said the bills are moving quickly.

"We want to make sure that we keep track of public safety and victims' rights, and make sure those don't get lost in the shuffle," he said. "Everybody does recognize there are some areas of the system that could be tweaked."

© Copyright 2014 The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

<http://detroit.cbslocal.com/2014/11/30/savings-eyed-in-changes-in-criminal-justice/>