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Smarter parole for a safer Michigan

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Over the last year, bipartisan efforts to reform Michigan's corrections system have intensified. Reducing Michigan's corrections spending is critically important, as evidenced by a recent report from the U.S. Department of Education: Over the last three decades, Michigan increased spending on corrections more than five times as fast as it did on public education.

Corrections spending averages \$2 billion a year, or 20 percent of the state's general fund. Government's job is to keep our communities safe in the most cost-effective way possible. But spending one out of every five general fund dollars on corrections robs our state of the ability to invest in the services proven to make our communities stronger and safer.

The best way to cut corrections spending is by safely reducing the size of our prisoner population. Last fall the Michigan House passed several bills that would do exactly that, with overwhelming bipartisan support. These House bills complement Senate legislation that would help probationers and parolees succeed while they are being supervised in the community, so they do not end up in prison.

Longer prison terms drive up the population. Michigan prisoners serve, on average, far longer terms than those in other states. One reason is that our parole board keeps too many people locked up beyond the time they are first eligible for release. While our parole system operates largely out of the public eye, the decisions made by this small group of appointed officials have an enormous impact on the state budget.

House Bill 4138, the smart and safe parole reform bill, will fix that problem by enforcing state law. It applies to people who have served the entire sentence imposed by the courts and who score low risk on the parole board's own evidence-based guidelines.

Currently, the law requires the board to release people who score low risk, unless there are "substantial and compelling" reasons to deny parole. But those reasons were not defined in the statute, leaving parole board members without consistent, objective criteria to guide their decisions.

HB 4138 simply defines the "objective and compelling reasons" to deny release. The board retains its authority to deny parole, whenever the evidence shows that it is in the interest of public safety to do so.

All the state and national research shows that simply keeping low-risk prisoners longer does not keep us any safer. Research also shows that evidence-based decisions are more accurate than the gut reactions of individual decision-makers.

The estimated \$75 million per year in savings from this reform could be invested in the Senate's proposed community-based programs for probationers and parolees, for serving victims of crime, for critical

mental health and substance abuse treatment services, and for education. That’s why HB 4138 is a smart reform that would also increase public safety.

We talk a lot in Lansing about making government smarter and more efficient. HB 4138, smart and safe parole reform, is an important opportunity to do just that.

Rep. Dave Pagel, R-Oronoko Township, serves the 78th District in the Michigan House of Representatives.

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