

Redeeming lives and restoring communities: Smart and Safe Parole Reform – HB 4138

Restoring prisoners to their homes and healing communities . . .

Michigan spends nearly \$2 billion a year on corrections. Too often, our parole board denies parole to people who have served their court imposed sentences and are first eligible for parole, whether or not they are a risk to public safety. As a result, we are spending tens of millions of dollars that could be invested in services proven to reduce crime and help crime survivors heal.

Our current parole policies don't reflect our values of accountability, hope, healing and supporting the purpose of each returning citizen's life. Communities and the families of prisoners are torn apart by incarceration – are all worthy of our collective support and of being treated with dignity. It's not moral to continue to punish individuals, families and society when there is no public safety benefit.

From an economic perspective, HB 4138 will safely reduce the prison population by eliminating the need for 3,200 prison beds in five years, thus saving \$75 million per year that could be used to restore families, create pathways to self-sufficiency and heal communities.

A restorative justice approach to crime and incarceration recognizes the value of every human life

The problem: Currently, the law requires the parole board to release people to parole supervision who score low risk on the Michigan Department of Correction's parole guidelines, unless there are "*substantial and compelling reasons*" to deny parole. However, this term is not defined in statute, and some parole board members rely on subjective reasons for denying parole.

Once people have served the minimum sentence that a judge found to be the appropriate punishment for the crime, keeping low-risk people behind bars longer is simply resentencing by the parole board. At some point, punishment must end and the focus shift to helping people succeed. When there is no evidence that an extra year or two has any impact on reoffending, not releasing low-risk people when they first become eligible is unfair, costly and harmful. Longer prison stays weaken family connections and reduce employment opportunities by widening the gap between skills and available jobs.

The Pew Center for the States found that Michigan had the longest average prison length of stay of any of the 35 states it studied in 2009.

The solution: HB 4138 simply defines "*substantial and compelling reasons*" and provides consistent, objective criteria to guide parole board decision-making.

Eligibility: HB 4138 is a modest reform. It applies only to low risk prisoners who have served the sentences imposed by the courts and to people sentenced *after* the bill is enacted. It does not apply to current prisoners.

Under HB 4138, the parole board still retains its authority to deny parole if evidence shows it's in the interest of public safety.

The impact on public safety: National and state research shows that simply keeping people incarcerated longer does not improve public safety or reduce recidivism.



We could reinvest the savings to connect reentering citizens with jobs, build stronger families and help heal communities through:

- Workforce development, including job training and citizen re-entry services.
- Mental health and substance abuse services for citizens reentering our communities.
- Education, early maternal and childhood interventions, and services for at-risk youth.
- Economic revitalization initiatives in communities hardest hit by crime and violence.
- Trauma-informed services to help crime survivors and communities heal.