

Gubernatorial candidates must address public safety, criminal justice reform

The September primaries have come and gone, and now voters are pressing the three main candidates for their views on some of the critical issues of the day: the Big Dig, state revenues and taxes, education, health care and more.

One critical issue is seemingly lost in the shuffle – ensuring safe communities. Despite a summer where we've seen an increase in violent crime in our cities, public safety is rarely discussed during this election season, except in races for attorney general and district attorney. But public safety and criminal justice issues should be near the top of our next governor's agenda.

Surely those topics are complex and complicated issues involving a myriad of public and private agencies, citizens and public officials. But focused attention to juvenile justice, sentencing and corrections will go a long way toward enhancing public safety.

Juvenile Crime – Our juvenile justice system is still reeling from the “tough on crime” policies implemented in the early 1990s that steered that system wildly in reaction to a few dangerous youth and a handful of high profile, horrific crimes. As a result, the Commonwealth's response to juvenile crime is heavily weighted toward confinement; we abandoned the successful approach pioneered in Massachusetts in the 1980's and now being showcased by other states. Clearly our juvenile justice system must ensure that the dangerous juveniles are locked up. Just as importantly, that system must ensure that youth who can benefit from correcting receive the attention they need.

Sentencing – The “get tough” approach also spawned a myriad of minimum mandatory sentences, largely to deal with the drug problem. For instance, a person convicted of selling 100 grams of cocaine would face a minimum of 10 years in prison, regardless of whether or not he or she was a first-time offender or a habitual criminal. Instead of a solution to the drug problem, mandatory minimum exacerbated a public safety problem. Nearly 60 percent of offenders given minimum mandatory sentences are not eligible for programs that help them get a job, find a place to live, and prepare to return to live amongst us. Chances are high they will return to crime. For too long, Massachusetts has shunned new approaches sentencing reforms that ensure long prison sentences for persistent violent offenders and shorter terms for those convicted of non-violent crimes. Meanwhile other states have reaped the benefits of improved public safety at less cost, allowing funds spent on prison to be shifted to education and other valued services.

Corrections Reform – The murder of former priest John Geoghan in prison in 2003 forced the state to address the corrections system. The commission led by former

Attorney General Scott Harshbarger recommended excellent reforms to address many of the problems. Little progress has been made to put those recommendations in place. Key among them are recommendations to ensure re-entry for offenders without recidivism.

Each year, 20,000 inmates complete their sentence and are returned to our communities. The vast majority receive little, if any, supervision and guidance to structure that return; as many would expect, 40% fail, commit a new crime and are returned to prison. We can do better; indeed many states have put in place systems that are proven to reduce those failures. Across the nation, corrections agencies have been working hard to effectively employ those measures and to manage inmates' return to the community in a safe and effective manner. States such as Georgia, Oregon, Iowa and Washington have made tremendous strides with these proven interventions; states such as Illinois, Maryland, Missouri and Maine are hard at work to do likewise. These and other corrections agencies are measuring their performance in reducing recidivism. It requires effective classification, managed movement from high security to community placement, and appropriate services dealing with substance abuse, employment, housing and other ingredients to ensure success.

The next governor will inherit a corrections and criminal justice system that is in need of dramatic changes. The governor in 2007, regardless of his or her political affiliation, will have to work hard from Day One to ensure that reforms are not simply recommended but actually implemented. It will require close supervision of the Department of Corrections, and close work with sometimes-reluctant Legislature.

The issues up for discussion in the governor's race are certainly important. But little is more important than our public safety and ensuring that our streets are safe. Political campaigns are often known as the "silly season," when irrelevant issues and concerns dominate the closing weeks of a campaign. Here is one vote for a thoughtful, focused discussion of a subject that is hardly silly: public safety.

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