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READER'S VIEW ON INCARCERATION & THE ECONOMY

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Suggested Title: Using the budget crisis to become smart on crime

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Idaho's current budget deficit poses a crisis for decision-makers. While prison spending increases, vital public services like Medicaid and education face cuts. Like all crises, this is also an opportunity. What better time to question the diminishing returns on the millions of dollars Idaho invests annually on corrections, probation and parole?

Unfortunately, our country leads the world in incarceration. Nearly one person in every 99 is behind bars. Between 1987 and 2007, the U.S. prison population tripled. A recent Pew Center on the States report ranked Idaho 2nd in the nation for adults under correctional control, at 1 in every 18 Idahoans. This growth has serious implications for our state budget. Last year, the Idaho Legislature set aside \$207 million, or 7.3 percent of total general fund expenditures, for corrections.

The Pew Center study also found states were not increasing their spending for community supervision in proportion to their growing caseloads. About \$8.70 out of \$10 spent on corrections in Idaho goes to incarceration and prison financing. This is evidenced by the Canyon County Jail requesting \$48 million of economic stimulus monies to build a new facility.

Instead, Canyon County could address fixing the conditions at the current facility, which are inhumane for inmates, jail employees and the general public. Issues such as inadequate jail staffing could be better resolved by decreasing the current inmate population and increasing funding for probation, parole and alternatives to incarceration. Building a new facility does not tackle the bigger issue of our society's over-reliance on incarceration.

Incarceration is a shortsighted solution that is hard on families, social services and taxpayers. We must fund better solutions, such as community based sentencing alternatives that preserve Idaho families, strengthen communities and rehabilitate individuals while reducing prison and jail costs.

We need reforms that will not only reduce the costs of incarceration, but also help ensure our communities are safe. If we're smart on crime, we can do both.

How? For starters, Idaho should carefully review the wisdom of mandatory minimum sentences and the enhancement of sentences for repeat substance-abuse offenses. Community-based programs, such as the successful Idaho Drug and Mental Health Courts, and those that offer substance abuse treatment and skill-training, are more effective and should be available to qualified individuals. Published reports indicate offender participation in Idaho felony drug courts achieved a 20% reduction in recidivism.

Minor violations of parole or probation should not automatically return the offenders to prison; instead, authorities should be permitted to impose alternate, rehabilitative sanctions.

We also need to ensure that our young people are given opportunities to succeed. Currently 15.9% of Idaho children live in poverty, and Idaho ranks 49th in the nation on education spending. The \$62 million cut in education funding proposed by Superintendent Tom Luna will deprive our children of the education and support they need, and increase corrections costs later. The cost of housing a prisoner for one year is 3.6 times that of educating one pupil.

These are not soft-on-crime arguments; they are hard facts.

Idaho communities need our support. We can address our budget problems without sacrificing public safety. It is possible to be both tough and smart on crime, and the state has a responsibility to take action now to become both.

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