



Judge pushes Sprague for more rehab funding

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STAFF WRITERS

A Hancock County judge on Monday urged a state legislator to direct more state funding toward rehabilitation and treatment of criminal offenders, as an alternative to sending them to prison.

Common Pleas Judge Reginald Routson attended a public discussion hosted Monday morning by state Rep. Robert Sprague, R-Findlay. Routson asserted that previous efforts to change Ohio's sentencing system and reduce the prison population, particularly House Bill 86 that took effect in 2011, haven't worked.

"There are more people in prison now than when the bill was passed," Routson said. He said the state's prison system was built to house 30,000 people, but is housing about 51,000.

The state needs to focus on "real solutions rather than superficial" goals that address prisoner numbers rather than the problems people face, Routson told Sprague, who serves on the Ohio House's Finance Committee, which oversees part of the budget for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

Routson said state resources that help pay for services offered by organizations like Century Health are too limited, and have "been cut tremendously over the course of time."

Those making their way through the courts must often wait for weeks to receive an initial psychological evaluation, Routson said.

He said funding shortages have limited the hiring of certified counselors, and only pay for one part-time Hancock County psychologist with the expertise to administer medication that helps combat dangerous behaviors and addictions.

"If I did a tally... the same factors are there for everyone" sentenced, Routson said. "Broken homes. Lack of education. Abuse as a child."

Sprague asked what works to turn a person's life around after he or she becomes a chronic criminal.

"Cognitive behavioral therapy," Routson said. "More intense forms of therapy" that take more time and money than many are willing to spend, he said.

"Everyone wants to assume that we all think the same way and react the same way to stresses in life," but we don't, he explained. "If you're born into nothing and all you know is despair, what do you care? What would make you want to behave?"

"What works is having a relatively accepting community that believes in rehabilitation, that believes in second chances. We just don't have that as a culture" in this country, Routson said.

There are some aspects of House Bill 86 that he supports, Routson said, particularly the elimination of some "collateral sanctions" that have hampered convicted felons' efforts to return to the workforce after they've served their sentences.

Routson said his docket has been packed with people seeking to get records expunged. Those records had previously disqualified them from acquiring certain licenses to work. A newer expunging law allows the erasing of records for first-time offenders whose crimes are deemed mild enough to warrant a second chance.

"Expunging was one of the finest things we did," Sprague said.

"This is something I'd like to work on," Sprague said of reducing criminal-related costs and seeking more proactive approaches to handling repeat offenders.

"To me, this is a very important issue," Sprague said. "I believe in redemption. The state doesn't need to put any obstacles in front of people who are willing to change."

Later Monday, Sprague met with area officials to weigh the benefits of expanding Medicaid in Ohio.

Injecting more money into a flawed health care system may not be the most efficient route, Sprague said.

"One of the biggest questions in my mind is the system we currently have. Is it the best we can do as a country?" Sprague said.

The changes are available as part of the Affordable Care Act, commonly known as "Obamacare." Republican Gov. John Kasich urged the state Legislature to approve expansion.

The federal government would pay costs for the first three years, a share that eventually drops to 90 percent. About 366,000 more state residents would be covered, according to the Associated Press.

Sprague warned that growing Medicaid now could mean fewer state programs later. Congress may not be able to fulfill its promises on borrowed money, either, he said.

"How will we be able to find that money from other sources?" he said.

Sprague said he was interested in discussing what the additional funds could be used for, if approved.

Lt. Ryan Kidwell, jail administrator, said more drug addiction and mental health services for inmates would be welcome.

Of the 91 inmates detained in the jail, about 27 percent have been diagnosed with a mental illness. Drug abuse remains an ongoing problem, and contributes to repeat offenses, he said.

Precia Stuby, director of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services board, said expanding Medicaid could free funds for new programs.

As opiate addiction remains an ongoing problem in the area, board members hope to create an area residential treatment clinic, Stuby said.

Sprague agreed with the importance of drug treatment in the district, and said he hopes to address the problem in some way.

"It's apparent. It scares me to death," he said.

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