



ASSEMBLY DEMOCRATS NEWS RELEASE

WWW.ASSEMBLYDEMS.COM



FOR RELEASE:

Nov. 23, 2009

Assemblywoman Spencer

(973) 624-1730

Assemblywoman Tucker

(973) 926-4320

Press Office

(609)292-7065

CONTACTS:

Majority Leader Watson Coleman

(609) 292-0500

Assemblyman Coutinho

(973) 589-0713

Assemblywoman Evans

(973) 247-1521

Assemblywoman Jasey

(973) 762-1886

**WATSON COLEMAN / COUTINHO / EVANS/ JASEY/ SPENCER /
TUCKER BILLS TO IMPROVE REHABILITATION EFFORTS IN
N.J. PRISONS ADVANCE**

Bill Package Will be Designed to Save Taxpayer Money by Cutting Recidivism

(TRENTON) – A sweeping bill package sponsored by six Assembly Democratic legislators to improve rehabilitation in New Jersey prisons and to save taxpayer dollars by cutting recidivism and giving released inmates an improved chance of success was advanced Monday by an Assembly panel.

The package is sponsored by Assembly Majority Leader Bonnie Watson Coleman and Assembly members Albert Coutinho, Elease Evans, Mila M. Jasey, L. Grace Spencer and Cleopatra G. Tucker. It stems from a series of hearings on Watson Coleman hosted throughout New Jersey to hear from citizens and experts on how to cut into recidivism and save public money.

The bills were released by the Assembly Law and Public Safety Committee.

"The pervasive cycle of arrest, release and re-arrest is failed system that wastes lives and costs taxpayers dearly," said Watson Coleman (D-Mercer). "Quite simply, it's a disgraceful and destructive cycle that must come to an end for the good of all New Jersey taxpayers and those directly affected by our failed system. We've seen too much money unsuccessfully spent on programs that don't work. These reforms are a long overdue step toward progress."

"These reforms range from improving education and job training to enhancing family support to eliminating antiquated roadblocks to success for those released from prison," said Coutinho (D-Essex). "These common sense steps will give people an opportunity to earn their second chance and ensure we spend public money wisely."

“None of these bills would make it easier to serve sentences,” said Spencer (D-Essex). “What they would do is make serving that time more sensible and help ensure that after their time is served, prisoners re-enter society ready to be productive citizens. That will save lives and taxpayer dollars.”

“The simple fact is that of the thousands people released from New Jersey prisons each year, 65 percent of the adults and 37 percent of the juveniles will return within two years,” said Tucker (D-Essex). “That is unacceptable, and these bills aim to not only to improve lives and neighborhoods, but to save money.”

“Spending money time and time again on prisoners who come and go from our prison systems is, quite simply, a waste,” said Evans (D-Passaic). “We need to do better, not only for the wellbeing of the people whose lives are being lost in our prisons, but for taxpayers who need to know their money is spent smartly.”

“We simply cannot afford to continue the present system of spending money repeatedly on repeat offenders,” said Jasey (D-Essex). “The time has come to change our approach so that we can give people and our society a better chance at a better future.”

The committee released:

The “Women and Families Strengthening Act” (A-4197), which would:

- End the prohibition in state law against released prisoners from receiving cash assistance benefits provided under Work First New Jersey.
- Require the state to contract with the lowest bidder for inmate telephone services, prohibit the contractor from imposing surcharges on inmate calls and bar the state from accepting revenue in excess of the cost of operating inmate telephone services.
- Establish a commission to examine strategies for strengthening bonds between jailed parents and their children.
- Require an assistant corrections commissioner establish and monitor policies affecting incarcerated mothers and their children.
- Prohibit the state from housing female inmates in the same facility as male inmates, if it results in conditions more restrictive than the male inmates.
- Require the state to make every effort to assign an inmate to a facility close to where the inmate’s family resides.

A bill (A-4199) designed to address incarceration concerns, which would:

- Allow prisoners in a state or county jail to keep \$25 of their monthly income earned for labor performed at the facility in from \$15

- Require the state to semiannually submit all inmate complaints to the Department of the Public Advocate.
- Require the state to develop an in-service training program for corrections officers that must include mental health sensitivity.

A bill (A-4201) designed to address release concerns, which would:

- Establish a faith-based programs coordinator with the state Department of Corrections to compile and disseminate information about faith-based groups and programs, especially those that provide assistance and services to inmates re-entering society.
- Establish Mental Health Courts to facilitate voluntary treatment of defendants who have mental health illnesses.
- Create a Prisoner Re-entry Commission and require the collection of data on recidivism and a fiscal estimate or the potential cost of any legislation that increases prison sentences.
- Give prisoners a 90-day grace period on outstanding fines and other monetary penalties.

A bill (A-4202) designed to address education and job training, which would:

- Require the state to create a mandatory workforce skills training and a mandatory education program in each state correctional facility.
- Require inmates to attain a high school equivalency certificate or high school diploma.
- Allow inmates and parolees to enter into agreements with institutions for education, training or other activities that, if successfully completed, could reduce parole terms.
- Establish a mandatory six-month period of post-release supervision for all state inmates.
- Allow a person who has been released from prison to obtain a court order that allows them to visit prisons, if they can show that such visits are likely to motivate and help rehabilitate other inmates.

"This is important unfinished business from the many hearings we held throughout New Jersey, during which we heard from thousands of people about how our system has failed people and cost us money," Watson Coleman said. "A broad coalition of community organizations, faith leaders, law enforcement officials and ordinary citizens have lined up behind these ideas and will work to build support for these well-informed and carefully crafted bills that reflect a desire to improve lives and save money."

On the Net:

