

Try new approach on young offenders

In Virginia, a three-year study of juvenile justice laws should have resulted in delinquent teens getting a better chance at rehabilitation, as well as punishment tailored to individual circumstances. Instead, the Virginia State Crime Commission put off recommendations for change last month and continued the study for a fourth year.

Said Del. Dave Albo, chairman of the House Courts of Justice Committee: "It will never, ever, ever get out of my committee."

In Congress, meanwhile, a two-year effort to focus juvenile justice laws on prevention is being undermined by a Chesapeake representative who insists that tougher prison sentences, not rehabilitation and education, are the answer for gang members.

Requiring harsh sentences for young gang members would force them to turn on their leaders, Rep. Randy Forbes reasoned. He opposes Hampton Roads colleague Bobby Scott's Youth PROMISE legislation.

In both cases, lawmakers with a punishment-first mentality are hindering efforts to break the cycle of crime and prevent delinquents from becoming hard-core criminals.

A recent study by JustChildren, an arm of the Legal Aid Justice Center, found that nearly 700 youths a year are convicted in adult court in Virginia. The study showed that teens treated as adults are 34 percent more likely to commit another crime than youths sent to the juvenile system.

The crime commission's delay in acting on juvenile laws, and Forbes' insistence on tougher sentencing in the juvenile justice bill before Congress, are counter to what we've learned from youth and adult criminals. If we lock them up, don't offer job training or counseling, don't teach them to read and write, and don't give them reason to change, they probably won't.

After decades of building prisons and corralling criminals, every year spending \$25,000 apiece to keep them behind bars, states are beginning to realize the current system doesn't keep us safe. It just gives us more felons at higher costs.

In Florida, which has the nation's third-largest prison system, the business community is leading a push to overhaul the criminal justice system. Leaders say the state can't afford to continue building - and filling - prisons when half the inmates are back behind bars within five years of release.

Rather than focusing on locking up all criminals, business lobbyists are pushing to divert nonviolent drug users into rehabilitation, increase programs to train inmates for jobs, and

improve their life skills and help them re-enter society, enhancing the likelihood that they'll lead productive lives.

Continued emphasis on prison building, wrote a coalition of Florida's business, religious and political leaders, leads to "too many nonviolent individuals being incarcerated, too many prisons needing to be built at astounding public cost [and] too many young people moving from the juvenile justice system into the adult justice system."

If community leaders - including three former state attorneys general and a retired corrections head - are making the case for early intervention, treatment and rehabilitation programs for adults, doesn't it make sense to do the same for juveniles? After all, they have less established behaviors and are more amenable to change.

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