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Rollins: Criminal justice reform — Texas style

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BY BROOKE ROLLINS

October is Crime Prevention Month, and I am reminded that not long ago people spoke of the “Texas Model” as a purely punitive approach to criminal justice. Decades of steady prison growth consumed an ever-increasing percentage of the general budget. Even with the nation’s highest incarceration rate, Texas’ cities and towns were still plagued with violence and property crime. We were getting a very poor return on our investment in criminal justice and corrections.

In 2007, the Legislature was faced with a tough decision. The biennial Legislative Budget Board projections called for an increase of more than 17,000 beds by the year 2012. This continuation of poor policy would have added an estimated \$2.7 billion to the state budget over a five-year period. Under the law and policy of the day, lawmakers had to either approve the expansion — in a time where spending was already growing at an alarming rate — or begin irresponsibly releasing inmates from correctional facilities back into our communities.

Rather than going back to voters hat-in-hand to justify the expenditure, the legislators redirected that funding toward cost-efficient reforms. Instead of continuing to rely heavily on high-cost incarceration, judges and prosecutors were provided with proven alternatives with which to handle non-serious offenders. Offenders who were placed in prison are now properly classified and placed in programs best suited for their unique issues. Upon release, these offenders were much less likely to commit another crime and far more likely to earn an honest wage and make a positive impact on their communities.

Still, naysayers were worried these smart, low-cost reforms would lead to an increase in crime, that saving money was of little gain if our neighborhoods and schools became more unsafe. This did not come to pass. Since the rethinking of our criminal justice policies in 2007, crime has dropped nearly 20 percent. Texas has managed to save billions of taxpayer dollars while better providing for the public’s safety.

Texas’ experience is proof that being smart on crime does not mean being “soft” on crime. As minor offenders are safely supervised within the community, prison space once spent housing petty thieves is now available for armed robbers. Violent thugs are punished in prison and kept from society, while the nonviolent property criminal is monitored closely and is still able to contribute to the community, maintain employment, provide for their family, pay for a large percentage of their supervision, and — most importantly — provide restitution to the victim of their crime.

Having worked closely with the Legislature to propose and implement these successful reforms, the Texas Public Policy Foundation created Right on Crime to take the “Texas Model” of criminal justice reform nationwide. Since its founding in 2010, the popularity of Right on Crime has grown exponentially. Initiatives are currently underway in almost 30 states, and the success experienced in Texas has been replicated time and again. Recently, the project’s policy director, Marc Levin, was invited to testify before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee on the success of Right on Crime’s endeavors.

Every dollar we save on costly incarceration is a dollar that a Texas family keeps. This is just another example of how limited, efficient government is a benefit to Texans everywhere. Communities are safer. Victims are made whole. Offenders are punished, rehabilitated and reintegrated as functioning members of society. As the Right on Crime project continues to grow, I look forward to seeing other states share in the success we have experienced in Texas.

Rollins is president and CEO of the Texas Public Policy Foundation.