



ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION

INTRODUCTION

A new campaign, “11x15 For Safer, Healthier Communities” (organized by the faith-based network WISDOM), seeks to expand prison diversion programs statewide and thereby reduce Wisconsin’s prison population by half – to 11,000 inmates – by 2015. The number 11,000 was chosen because it would bring Wisconsin’s per capita incarceration rate in line with neighboring Minnesota, which has comparable crime rates and demographics, but a lower incarceration rate due to statewide community-based treatment programs.

The WCC strongly supports the goal of the 11x15 campaign to fund diversion programs in every Wisconsin county.

DISCUSSION

In the past two decades, Wisconsin’s prison population has soared. In 1995, our state incarcerated around 11,000 inmates; today that number is over 23,000. For the first time in our history, we spend more state dollars on our prison system than we do on our University of Wisconsin system.

The 11x15 campaign seeks full funding of the Treatment Alternatives and Diversion (TAD) program, which authorizes annual state grants to counties for the establishment and operation of community-based programs such as day reporting centers, drug treatment courts, and mental health courts. These programs address not only alcohol and other drug abuse and mental health issues, but they also help with employment, housing, and family reunification. Their comprehensive approach makes offenders more accountable and helps them become law-abiding, productive, and responsible members of the community.

The programs have been proven to reduce broken families and homelessness, and increase job prospects for ex-offenders. These programs also save money and reduce recidivism. A recent report by the Population Health Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UWPHI) found that “Every \$1.00 invested in TAD yields benefits of \$1.93 to the criminal justice system through averted incarceration and reduced crime.” It currently costs an average of \$32,000 annually to house a prison inmate. The cost of community-based corrections is under \$8,000.

TAD programs also help to reduce the racial disparity that exists in our correctional system. In 2007, for example, Wisconsin had the highest incarceration rate of Black youth in the nation. In 2010, Black inmates constituted 51 percent of the prison population, even though only 6 percent of the state’s population is Black. Leading researchers have concluded that imprisoning large numbers of African American males contributes to high poverty rates for their children.

CATHOLIC TEACHING

Visiting the incarcerated is one of the seven works of mercy. However, as Pope Benedict XVI has emphasized, this work of mercy extends beyond prison visits. “To be complete,” he explained, “this [work] requires a full capacity for welcoming the inmates, ‘making room for them in our own time, in our home, in our friendships, in our laws, in our cities.’” (*Address to the Inmates of Rome’s Rebibbia District Prison*, 2011) Indeed, the Church has long advocated for just laws, for the humane treatment of prisoners, and for their reintegration into the community.

WCC POSITION

In 1999, Wisconsin’s Catholic bishops issued *Public Safety, the Common Good, and the Church: A Statement on Crime and Punishment in Wisconsin*. The statement set forth five guiding principles for corrections policies:

1. Convey respect for the human person.
2. Serve the common good.
3. Exercise an option for the poor and marginalized.
4. Serve the end of restoration, even when enforcing strict punishment.
5. Foster the principle of solidarity among all in the community.

Existing TAD programs meet the criteria set forth by the bishops’ statement. Currently, however, TAD programs operate in only seven of Wisconsin’s 72 counties because of limited state funding. For the benefit of all, the time has come to expand these programs to the remaining 65 counties.

ACTION REQUESTED

Please urge legislators to increase budget funding for Treatment Alternatives and Diversions (TAD) programs.

- Spending \$75 million to fully fund the TAD program is fiscally responsible since it will save the state money by utilizing community-based treatment programs rather than more costly prisons.
- Expanding TAD will make our state safer and stronger by reducing crime and recidivism, strengthening families, increasing job readiness, and reducing poverty.
- TAD treatment programs are far more effective than incarceration in holding offenders accountable and helping them overcome their addictions.

For more information, please contact Barbara Sella at 608-257-0004.

To find contact information for your State Representative or Senator, visit the Wisconsin State Legislature website at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov> and click on “Who Represents Me,” or call the State Legislative Hotline, 1-800-362-9472.