



Arizona House of Representatives

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Representative Cecil Ash

Memorandum

TO: Editorial Board, Arizona Republic - East Valley

FROM: Representative Cecil Ash

DATE: June 8, 2012

SUBJECT: My Turn Opinion

The legislative session of 2012 was memorable for many reasons. Chief among them was that this was the first time in the four years that we had the enjoyable task of dealing with a budget surplus.

To its credit, the legislature used restraint in spending and provided \$450 million into the rainy day fund. With some revisions to the tax code, additional attention to education reform and providing for additional protections for life, the Republican majority has kept its word to the constituency that elected it.

A financial crisis as we have had over the last four years requires greater scrutiny of the use of our tax dollars than is demanded in times of plenty. There remains a neglected issue deserving of more focused attention by future legislatures. Released Arizona inmates experience an unnecessarily high rate of recidivism --42.2%. It is noteworthy that Japan has a recidivism rate of 3%.

Greater focus is needed on rehabilitation during and following incarceration. Caution: Most inmates will be released back into society. The book, **Desert Pawns**, by Bob Kaplan and Gerald LeMoine, asks the question: "Who would you rather have released from prison? An unskilled, violent predator or a stable, educated ex-offender with a future?"

We need to break the cycle of re-incarceration. Inmates need education, counseling (in some cases therapy), job training, and more accountability and supervision. If we expect that private prisons are interested in "rehabilitating" themselves out of business, we are mistaken. Yet the legislature and the governor continue to condone their use. Private prisons are not to be faulted for striving to make a profit. The State's role is not to make a profit, but to secure the safety of its citizens.

The incarceration of lawbreakers is necessary, not only to keep them off the streets, but also to presumably return them to the community as rehabilitated citizens. Doesn't it make sense to have someone return with a high school education, trained in some vocation or some specialized skill?

Opponents may argue that the cost is prohibitive. But what is the societal cost of the cycle of re-incarceration? And what of the families of the 40,000 inmates, many of whom are on state or federal assistance, paid for by taxpayers, because their breadwinner is unavailable.

We must be more resourceful. Many retired persons would enjoy being of service in teaching as volunteers or with minimal pay. The reward of helping others change their lives is often reward enough. But the prisons have few programs to take advantage of our communities' available talent, much of it "free of charge."

Last August several other legislators and I toured the Primavera facility in Tucson. Primavera had received a federal grant to work with inmates who were being released from the Department of Corrections. Working with 850 released felons, Primavera achieved a recidivism rate of 13% after three years.

Is there any reason why this project could not be duplicated elsewhere in the state? It would require a change of perspective among elected officials, but the public should demand it.