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Top Headlines

Pima County leading the state in criminal justice reform efforts

Pima County is a leader in Arizona for criminal justice reform efforts, initiating innovate programs and diversion while several bills addressing the issue statewide remain in flux at the state Legislature.

That was the consensus when community members and several participants from last year’s Arizona town Hall on criminal justice reform gathered in Tucson last week to discuss recommendations from November’s statewide town hall.

In 2018, Arizona Town Hall, a nonprofit organization that educates, connects and empowers people to resolve societal issues through consensus, held 17 town halls addressing criminal justice in Arizona for more than 2,000 participants across the state. For the first time in the groups’ 56-year history, two of the town halls were held inside Arizona prisons, which board chairman Hank Peck said allowed the group to get information from a population they otherwise wouldn’t.

At the completion of last years’ community events, more than 100 people involved in the process gathered in Phoenix and produced a report of recommendations for meaningful criminal justice reform that was sent to state lawmakers and community leaders.

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participant in the town halls process, said during last week's gathering.

Cramer discussed Pima County's diversion opportunities for juvenile offenders and reducing the juvenile inmate population from about 400 a decade ago to about 40 today.

She also touted the Tucson Police Department's Mental Health Support Team and its program for drug offenders, saying they are keeping people out of jail for disorderly conduct charges and other misdemeanors and instead connecting them with treatment.

Most of the successful diversion programs are funded with grants and Cramer urged people at the town hall to contact state lawmakers to push for permanent funding.

More voices for reform

Assistant Pima County Public Defender Nate Wade, who's duties with the public defender's office includes legislative advocacy, said he brought prosecutors, probation employees, defense attorneys and representatives from the Arizona Department of Corrections into the bill writing process.

"When I was in law school, I worked at the state legislature in an internship and realized the only people there were prosecutors. There was only one voice," Wade said. "When you only have voice, sometimes good intentions kind of makes bad policy without balance."

Several recommendations from the statewide town hall on criminal justice reform found their way into bills proposed at the start of the legislative session, although many are now dead, after failing to receive committee hearings.

Wade said that there are only three or four members of the legislature that don't believe in some sort of criminal justice reform and that bi-partisan support of the proposed bills was strong this year.

"We may make baby steps this session or next session," Wade said. "If we can keep having these tough discussions and find ways to work together, eventually we'll get there."

 Juli Roberts

Juli Roberts, Warden of the Whetstone Unit, Arizona Department of Corrections speaks during a presentation and action-focused discussion on the recommendations from the 2018 Arizona Town Halls on Criminal Justice Reform during a meeting at Randolph City Golf Course Clubhouse at 600 S Alvernon Way, Tucson, AZ on March 19, 2019 in Tucson, AZ.

Ron Medvescek / Arizona Daily Star

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and reform in many different ways when it comes to prisons' purpose.

"It's swinging more towards programming now rather than locking them up and throwing away the key," Roberts told the group. "I've seen both, and locking them up and throwing away the key doesn't work."

The Arizona Department of Correction's goals include creating positive change in inmates' behavior, along with reducing recidivism over the next 10 years by 25 percent.

"(These people are) in prison because they didn't make good decisions or maybe didn't have the skills to do so," Roberts said. "If we don't change that behavior, they get out and they come right back in."

The Arizona Department of Corrections has an inmate population of about 41,000. Roughly 12,000 of those inmates need ongoing mental health services and about 77 percent of inmates have a substance abuse history and need, Roberts said. On top of that, many inmates that come into the prisons only have about a fourth or fifth grade reading comprehension.

2018 Arizona Town Hall

A small crowd listens during a presentation and action-focused discussion on the recommendations from the 2018 Arizona Town Halls on Criminal Justice Reform during a meeting at Randolph City Golf Course Clubhouse at 600 S Alvernon Way, Tucson, AZ on March 19, 2019 in Tucson, AZ.

Ron Medvescek / Arizona Daily Star

About 95 percent of people sentenced to Arizona prisons will at some point be released from prison, Roberts told the crowd.

"We want when they return to community, that they have a good job, pay taxes and interact with community in a positive manner," Roberts said. "We can't just house them when they're incarcerated and dump them off in the streets, it doesn't work that way."

The Tucson prison offers mental health programming, substance abuse counseling and a variety of courses, including cognitive restructuring, changing offender behavior, money management, parenting skills and preparing for re-entry. The prison also has an incentive program that rewards positive behavior.

ADC has the third largest budget in the state, taking in over \$1.1 billion a year since 2012. In a March 12 tweet, Governor Doug Ducey said he's supporting an increase to the department's budget to cover raises for correction employees of 5 to 15 percent.

Roberts said that over the last eight years, she's noticed the shift in focus on programming rather than simple incarceration. The biggest push has come within the last two years. but it's too much

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said.

“We can only do so much before they hit the gate,” Roberts said. “Once they hit the gate, I think it’s all of us together that need to give them a hand up or try to remove the barriers they face.”

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