WSCC 2010 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

PRINCIPLES

We are called to promote the well-being of all, and to protect the lives and dignity of all, especially the weak, the vulnerable, the voiceless. While society may reject some people because they are in prison, we work to enhance their dignity, improve their lives, and meet their needs.

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, USCCB, 2007

THREE-STRIKES LAW: Washington statutes include a "Three-Strikes Law" that mandates 25 years to a life sentence for persons convicted of three crimes from a specific list of crimes. Many of the defendants sent to jail under three-strikes laws are non-violent repeat offenders. The original intent of the law was to stop violent criminals, but the result has been that some criminals with a history of minor offenses, such as petty theft or drug dealing have longer terms than criminals who commit violent acts. The number of those convicted under the three-strikes statute continues to grow, over populating a bulging prison system. In addition, studies of three-strikes laws have shown that African Americans are disproportionately affected by the policy. Advocates will support legislation to reform the three-strikes law to provide more equitable sentencing.

INDIGENT DEFENSE: Effective legal counsel is a cornerstone of the criminal justice system and ensures extension of justice to the poor and vulnerable. Indigent defendants are to be provided with a qualified and capable attorney, but this often does not occur. Caseloads are to be set at a reasonable level to ensure that representation is thorough. Budget cuts to indigent representation programs may result in many not receiving adequate legal representation. Additionally, every year over 80 percent of low-income people do not receive the necessary assistance to resolve their critical civil legal problems.

ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS TO INCARCERATION: Many persons with drug and alcohol abuse problems or a mental illness end up in jail or prison, without adequate assessment and treatment for their underlying problems. Many times these same persons are "repeat" visitors to jails, hospitals, and shelters. Several counties have instituted drug and mental health courts with positive results. The budget shortfall may put these courts in jeopardy.

RE-ENTRY: Solid transition and re-entry programs are necessary to reductions in recidivism. Two years ago, a law was adopted to assist in reentry planning, transition, work release, treatment, education and housing for offenders being released from state custody. Considered an important first step, the law did not gain enhancements due to the budget deficit in the 2009 session. Given the current economic conditions, maintenance of current programs will be an important consideration for policy makers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

WSCC SUPPORTS:

- Reforming the three-strikes law
- Maintaining resources for indigent defense and civil legal programs
- Creating effective alternatives to incarceration for those with a drug/alcohol abuse or mental illness diagnosis
- Maintaining transition and re-entry programs