

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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COLUMBUS - Today, 43 signatories sent a letter to Gov. Strickland, Senate President Harris, and Speaker Budish, urging them to convene the 128th General Assembly to consider Senate Bill 22 and House Bill 235.

These two pieces of legislation would make widely-supported, commonsense changes to Ohio's criminal and juvenile justice systems that would save the State of Ohio millions of dollars each year while having no adverse, and likely a positive, impact on public safety, the letter states.

SB 22, sponsored by State Sen. Bill Seitz (R-Cincinnati), makes numerous reforms to Ohio's criminal justice system, including raising the threshold amount for felony theft, eliminating sentencing disparities between crack and powder cocaine offenses, and modifying the intervention in lieu of conviction process.

SB 22 was passed by the Senate Judiciary Committee on Criminal Justice in June 2009 and has languished ever since, despite bipartisan support.

HB 235, sponsored by State Rep. Tracy Heard (D-Columbus), would restore judicial discretion to several areas of juvenile delinquency law, including bindover, serious youthful offender proceedings, and gun specifications.

The letter emphasized the financial benefits Ohio would see from the passage of these two bills: [W]ith Ohio facing a budget deficit anticipated to be \$48 billion, it is imperative that we begin to enact cost-saving measures now. If SB 22 and HB 235 are enacted before the end of the year, Ohio can start realizing the cost savings of the two bills before the next biennial budget is adopted.

The fiscal note for SB 22, prepared by the Ohio Legislative Service Commission, estimates that the state could save \$13.7 million annually if SB 22 is enacted. A fiscal note has not been prepared for HB 235, but an analysis by the Ohio Poverty Law Center estimates that had HB 235 been in effect, Ohio could have saved \$16 million in fiscal year 2010, had each juvenile court judge and magistrate sentenced just one juvenile who was incarcerated in an Ohio Department of Youth Services facility to a community-based facility, instead.

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