

Can society provide inmates better reentry?

GUEST OPINION

An inmate

History has a way of repeating itself. We can learn a lot from it. At the end of World War I, Germany surrendered unconditionally. Along with that came economic sanctions and reparations so outlandish in nature that Germany couldn't possibly survive. John Maynard Keynes, a young British economist at the time, was so shocked by the hearings that in 1919 he wrote a book titled "The Consequence of The Peace." Keynes asserted that Germany's inability to comply with the treaty would eventually turn ugly. He made it clear that Europe would forever be scarred by the shortsighted policy of the three-nation panel, made up of France, the United Kingdom and the United States, that penned the Treaty of Versailles. It was also noted that Germany, unable to meet the rigorous demands, would most certainly revert back to the same situation they got into to begin with — war, and so they did.

Is there a chance that Germany might have reentered the world arena peacefully with a policy more tailored toward success than failure? Arguably,

yes. So let's look at some of the questions as they pertain to bad policy in our justice system today. Recidivism is at an all-time high, while public safety budgets are at historic lows. Three out of every four felons released from prison reoffend and return to state and federal prison facilities within three years of being released. Most go back for the same type of behavior that sent them away in the first place. Annually, \$36,000 is spent to house just one inmate. Can we afford not to ask some questions: Is our policy shortsighted? Is it lacking the balance to achieve its goal? Is it outdated? Does it work? Are there any easy solutions? All these questions, and many more, need to be asked by you and me.

Let's look at a few of the obstacles a person releasing from prison faces. Identification is one thing most of us take for granted. Let's face it, who doesn't have ID? What would it be like if you didn't have usable identification? The truth is that most people getting

out of prison are unable to obtain a valid Washington State ID card. What they do have is a Washington State Department of Corrections Badge that clearly says 'OFFENDER' #123456 in big bold letters. The Department of Licensing does not honor it as valid proof of self, unless accompanied with an e-letter from DOC on file for 60 days. You can't cash a check with it, rent a motel room or apartment and you sure wouldn't want to use it when seeking employment!

Something as simple as a valid ID would give a returning citizen a giant advantage in making the positive steps needed as they attempt to overcome extreme obstacles. What about transportation? Our community has a wonderful transit system in place. It is used to get to and from work, school, and a number of other daily tasks. People returning to community are required to be at appointments on time and seek employment. Transportation plays a crucial role in whether or not a person can realistically meet the demands of their release plan. A simple monthly bus pass program for re-

leasing offenders would be a crucial component in a positive and successful transition. It could be the difference between being unemployable and being gainfully employed.

Such matters, among many, are the problems people like myself face as we re-enter society. I am releasing to your community in July and I'm well aware of the challenges that I and all other convicted felons face when we are released. I've written this letter as an educational tool, one that may bring up just a few of the unseen issues and questions as we talk about budgets and shortfalls. Is there a direct correlation between shortsighted policy and recidivism? I say Yes!

I believe everyone has a responsibility to come together and look for solutions to the problems we face as a community. We need a real balance in our system, one that benefits everyone. I'm doing everything in my power to be a good neighbor and a contributing part of the solution upon my release. I don't want to return to a prison system that I've given 25 years to. Today, I choose freedom!

Can I count on some of you to help out? I urge everyone who may be in a position to rent to, hire or even just mentor a person honestly trying to stop the cycle through our prisons, to do so. Please! Everyone deserves a chance if they're willing to work for it. Why not be part of the solution? There would be fewer problems. History says that, put in the correct environment, success is a truth!

This column was written by a Washington State Department of Corrections inmate from Whatcom County whose name is withheld. It was submitted to the Tribune by Irene Morgan of the Whatcom County Re-Entry Coalition, which aims to help those returning from incarceration.

Morgan reports that the coalition recently completed a reentry class at an average cost per person of \$981 to support them with housing, case management and functional literacy skills. "For each person who is successful, that is a \$35,019 savings per year. Is this a possible solution for our out-of-balance system?" she asks. For more information, go to the website www.whatcomrec.org.