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VIEWPOINTS

We must provide a landing place for ex-prisoners

Without a re-entry program, we're setting them up for failure, says **Christina Melton Crain**

Recently, Doug Deason wrote a column in *The Dallas Morning News* on the importance of criminal justice reform. We applaud his efforts as founder of the Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center at Southern Methodist University, his passion for criminal justice reform and his column.

Elected leaders from both parties have made the reduction in the number of people incarcerated in our prisons a priority. As one looks at the enormous cost to taxpayers of keeping offenders behind bars, it makes sense to re-evaluate how we approach criminal justice.

The United States locks up more of its citi-

zens than any nation in the world, and second place is not even close. According to the International Centre for Prison Studies, the U.S. incarceration rate is 737 per 100,000 people; Russia comes in second at 615 per 100,000 people. The U.S. also is No. 1 in locking up women, with nine out of every 100 prisoners being female.

Today, 1.5 million of our fellow Americans are behind bars. We have to ask ourselves: Are Americans more crooked than the rest of the world? Of course not. However, policy changes led to a spike in the number of prisoners across the nation.

This is the genesis of the criminal justice reform movement. In Texas, we have made great strides toward reducing the prison population and easing the burden on taxpayers. Even so, we must realize reducing the prison population means formerly incarcerated people will return

to our communities.

Currently, as many as 70,000 ex-offenders are released back into Texas communities each year. For each one of these ex-offenders who does not reoffend and return to prison, taxpayers save an average of \$22,500 per year.

If we do not have a solid re-entry program for these men and women, we are setting them up for failure. Former inmates need employment, housing, transportation, health care and many other services to reintegrate into society. To do anything less increases the chance they will reoffend, harming others and returning to prison.

At Unlocking Doors, we work to make sure that former inmates can change their outlooks, which ultimately changes their lives. We use a specialized re-entry model that relies on carefully coordinated and collaborative partnerships with numerous statewide agencies, other nonprofits, community service providers and

corporations.

Without programs like ours and the cooperation of our partners, many ex-offenders will reoffend. This will cost taxpayer dollars, increase our crime rate, and destroy the chances for a holistic, healthy and productive society.

Criminal justice reform and re-entry programs must work hand-in-hand. If we do not make a way for ex-offenders to make a life for themselves, reform efforts will falter and — even worse — crime will increase and lives that could have been saved will be destroyed. We owe ourselves, ex-offenders and their families better than that.



Christina Melton Crain is chief executive of Unlocking Doors and former head of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice. She wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.