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MCGOWAN: REALIGNMENT IS WORKING

Local Governments - Exclusive — 02 November 2012

Californians seem to like their local governments. In fact, the recently released report from the Public Policy Institute of California suggests that voters have strong confidence in their local governments and want more authority shifted to the local level. Not surprisingly, this is precisely the thinking behind public safety realignment, a historic change to California's public safety system.

Governor Brown calls this the "principle of subsidiarity." When something needs to get done, give it to the smallest, least centralized organization that has the ability to do it. That is essentially what is happening with many public safety functions.

A year ago California began shifting responsibility for certain criminal offenders from state to county control. Under "realignment," as it is called, counties are now managing approximately 15,000 lower-level inmates in county jails who previously would have served time in state prison. Another 23,000 former state prison inmates now are supervised by county probation departments. It is worth noting that, despite claims to the contrary, "realignment" does not equal "early release." Not a single offender has been released from state prison early. The only thing that has changed is where they are being held. And counties are working thoughtfully and responsibly to see that the transition from jail back to community results in improved community safety and offender outcomes.

The goal of realignment is to reduce state prison populations to levels mandated by federal court decisions – but also to save money and better protect the public. Counties were provided state resources on an ongoing basis to fund locally developed plans for dealing with these new responsibilities. In each county, a team of county, court, and community partners come together to discuss and recommend effective programs and services to address offenders' needs. Communities decide together how to best meet goals of reducing recidivism, reconnecting families, and protecting the public.

Recognizing that a "one size fits all" approach will not be successful, each county has the flexibility and authority to design programs and services to manage these offenders in a way that makes the most sense locally. Most counties are relying on a mix of custody, supervision, and treatment options. Some — including my home county of Yolo — are using new or expanded pre-trial diversion programs to keep low-risk suspects out of jail, making space available for more serious offenders. Others are delivering services for offenders — probation supervision, job skills, behavioral health treatment, educational services, and medical assistance — in a one-stop location. Counties are evaluating risks and needs so that supervision and treatment resources can best be invested in the offenders most likely to reoffend. Not every new program is going to be perfect, but so far, realignment is doing what it was designed to do — give county governments the resources, flexibility and authority to manage offenders locally.

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These new county responsibilities come with a price tag, and therein lies the biggest threat to the long term success of realignment. Right now, funding for realignment could be altered by a future act of the Legislature. Counties need the certainty of permanent, constitutionally protected funding to confidently put in place a variety of programs and services that best meet the short- and long-term needs of their communities. CSAC is supporting Proposition 30 because it contains those critical protections.

Realignment provides county supervisors across the state the opportunity to set a local vision – whether it is around reducing recidivism, healthy families, or safe and sustainable communities. As decision makers, we can direct county budget and policy decisions toward a common goal.

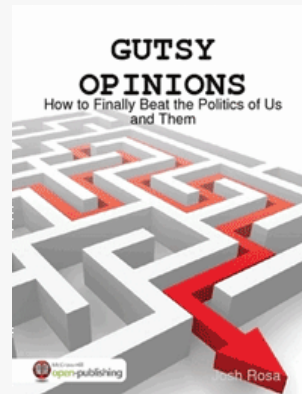
Counties are prepared to do our part to ensure that realignment is a local success. Voters keep saying they want more authority at the local level; with the proper tools at hand, we are prepared to be accountable to them.

Mike McGowan is President of the California State Association of Counties and a Yolo County supervisor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mike



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