

VIEWPOINTS

Prisons must be top priority



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Texas faces a problem so critical it overwhelms all others. Our criminal justice system is grinding to a halt. Our prisons are overflowing. Yet, instead of facing the problem, we are releasing criminals at record rates. This is not a solution. It is the problem.

Because of our prison space shortage, Texas faces increasing crime rates and a parole system run amok. However, the issue of increasing state prison capacity was simply not a budget priority in Austin during the regular legislative session.

Our legislators shoveled funds to our state bureaucracies so they could continue business as usual. But the Texas prison system has stopped functioning. It again closed its doors to convicted criminals. What is the current solution? For the Texas Parole Board to release convicts at a faster and faster pace? For the first time in our history, we have more convicted criminals on parole than in prison. This is shameful. It is also unacceptable.

The Parole Board has become expert at devising ingenious ways of "speeding up" the releases of convicted felons. Early parole has become the status quo. It appears that our prisons have ceased to be meaningful punishment but are now simply "rest stops" for convicted criminals.

In Texas today, the average time served by an inmate is less than 20 percent of his or her given sentence. This average would even be lower except that, by law, certain classifications of violent offenders must serve one-third of their sentences.

Although the lack of prison space has reached crisis proportions, the last two Legislatures have virtually ignored the issue of prison construction.

The first duty of government is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens. As the federal government is responsible for our national defense, the state government is responsible for the criminal justice system. It should and must be our elected officials' top priority.

Representatives of Associated Texans Against Crime have traveled throughout the state and heard from victims, law enforcement officials and concerned citizens. They want to see criminals off the streets. They want more prisons. They want to see criminals serve the sentences they were given. Prisons and parole are top priorities to the citizens of this state.

Prison construction ought to have been the first program funded during the legislative session, not the last. The longer we delay this issue, the longer we continue to jeopardize the lives and safety of our children, our senior citizens — in fact, every citizen in this state.

When there is no prison space, punishment is not sure, many crimes will go virtually unpunished, and people will live in fear. It is imperative that we solve this problem quickly. We call upon the Legislature to make prison construction a top priority when it meets in special session. We cannot afford to ignore this issue any longer.

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