

Something new: Pols want to know what works

PHIL BRINKMAN

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Crime is down and deficits are up, a combination that may be bringing Democrats and Republicans together to craft a more cost-effective approach to public safety.

Corrections Secretary Matt Frank said he knew something had changed when he started meeting with legislators last year to discuss proposed budget cuts.

"I was very seldom asked the question, 'Is this tough on crime or is this weak on crime?'" he said. "The more common question was, 'Is this effective? Does this work?' And I was getting that from both sides of the aisle."

In the last session, the GOP- controlled Legislature approved a series of modest reforms by Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle, including early release for certain offenders who complete drug and alcohol treatment.

And Republicans are introducing reform bills that only Democrats would have sponsored 10 years ago, including one measure by former GOP Sen. Bob Welch to move eligible offenders to halfway houses six months before their release from prison to aid in their reintegration to society.

Welch had been one of the strongest supporters during the 1990s for longer prison terms and abolishing parole.

"As far as I'm concerned, I was on the winning side of that and got my way," he said. "Now, I'm circling back and saying, 'OK, now that I know we're going to lock up the bad guys for a sufficient length of time, now we've got to look at what happens when they get out.'"

Other factors are making compromise more possible: The overall crime rate is at its lowest point in Wisconsin since 1972. The incidence of violent crime is the lowest since 1988. Crime no longer ranks among the public's chief concerns.

In 1994 and 1996, crime topped the list of the most pressing state problems, according to an annual survey conducted for the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. It came in second in five of the other six years between 1990 and 1997. That has been eclipsed in recent years by concerns about taxes, health- care costs and the economy.

Wisconsin's prison population is at an all-time high, and the cost to house those offenders is soaring - \$28,000 each. At the same time, the governor and Legislature are under pressure to eliminate a projected deficit in the next two-year budget of \$1.6 billion.

Still, most of the legislative changes amount to tinkering around the edges, say advocates of more sweeping reforms aimed at stopping repeat offenders from committing crimes by helping them find work, housing and other support. And not even all of those are getting the green light.

Last spring, the Republican- controlled Senate unanimously approved a GOP bill to help counties set up programs to provide alternatives to prosecution or prison for certain nonviolent offenders with drug or alcohol problems.

Backers said it would reduce the number of people who re-offend, save the state millions of dollars in prison costs and give judges the power to order someone to undergo treatment without going to prison.

The measure was also endorsed by a committee in the Republican-led Assembly before it was scuttled by Assembly Speaker John Gard, R- Peshtigo.

"They came here with platitudes about, 'Oh, if we just would care more for these people . . . everything will be just fine,'" Gard said. "These are people who have been convicted of being drug dealers or other types of criminals. I don't immediately say we've got to find a way to keep them in the community."

But Sen. Carol Roessler, R- Oshkosh, the bill's chief sponsor in the Senate, said she expects the Legislature will take up many more such measures in the coming years. She said she was hopeful Republicans and Democrats would work together to change the old political calculus that held that anything other than more prisons and longer sentences was "soft on crime."

"If you want results and you want to save taxpayers money and you want to have fewer victims of crime, this is what you need to do.