



News & Analysis from The Center for Michigan

With a sober eye, a conservative reconsiders

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By Pat Shellenbarger

Craig DeRoche concedes there were times during his six years in the Michigan Legislature, including his years as speaker of the House, that he wanted to speak out against the conventional wisdom that sending more people to prison was the proper response to crime.

But he was worried it might prompt questions of why he, an outspoken conservative, was bucking his own Republican Party — and it could reveal an embarrassing secret.

“The easier course was just not to bring it up,” he said.

Now that his struggle with alcoholism no longer is a secret, DeRoche is spending much of his time counseling government leaders to break their costly addiction to huge prison systems.

“Spending more on prisons doesn’t lead to safer communities,” DeRoche said. “That’s something our government has tried for a long time. It contributes to the breaking up of families, it contributes to people being on public assistance. It has all these unintended consequences.”

DeRoche’s own struggle with alcoholism has defined much of his thinking on criminal justice, particularly since “addiction is such a big part of the criminal justice system.”

All through February, Bridge will report on the policy ferment inside Republican circles on finding new ways to handle prisons and felons.

In 2010, two years after he left the Legislature due to term limits, he was arrested in Saline for drunken driving. He pleaded no contest to impaired driving and was sentenced to six months’ probation.

A few months later, he again was arrested at his home in Novi after a neighbor called police, saying he was drunk and carrying a handgun. A judge dismissed that charge, but DeRoche's secret was out.

"After I was arrested," he said, "the curtain came down, and I was standing there. What I chose to do is focus on recovering."

His arrest also freed him to talk openly about his belief that building more prisons was a waste of money.

Last June at a conference of the Drug Policy Alliance, a group that advocates treating addicts rather than locking them up, DeRoche and three other conservative stalwarts faced a Washington conference room filled with liberals. His fellow panelists included Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform; David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute; and Pat Nolan, head of Justice Fellowship.

"I was speaking on my views of what's wrong with the justice system and what reforms could be done from a conservative perspective," DeRoche said. After he and his fellow panelists finished, "all three said, 'Where have you been? We need you in the fight,'" he recalled.

Last November, Nolan hired DeRoche as director of external affairs for the Virginia-based Justice Fellowship, an arm of Prison Fellowship, a Christian organization founded by Watergate conspirator Charles Colson. DeRoche spends much of his time traveling the country, speaking to groups such as the Conservative Political Action Conference and the Southern Republican Leadership Conference.

"The biggest part of my job is changing the narrative on justice in America," he said. "Too many people believe bigger prisons and longer sentences are the answers to our woes."

While many criminals do threaten public safety and need to be locked up, mandatory sentences and other tough-on-crime measures are not appropriate in all cases, particularly when there is no victim, he said. If defendants are not dangerous to the community, DeRoche said, "We shouldn't be giving them a free pass to go and sleep it off in prison on the taxpayers' dime."



Former GOP House Speaker Craig DeRoche says "Michigan has the opportunity to be the model" on corrections reform. (courtesy photo)

Not all politicians agree, but some conservative leaders and organizations are joining his cause. The Texas Public Policy Foundation recently created a program called Right on Crime to help conservatives reduce spending on prisons while maintaining public safety.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry, hardly a bleeding heart, in 2007 called for increased spending on rehabilitation programs to stem his state's rising prison population.

"I couldn't remember the last time a Texas governor said something like that in a state-of-the-state speech," said Marc Levin, director of the Center for Effective Justice at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Texas lawmakers subsequently enacted reforms to avoid a projected increase of 17,000 inmates, saving an estimated \$2 billion over five years, Levin said.

Dozens of conservative leaders, including Norquist and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, have signed Right on Crime's statement of principles.

Many conservatives support criminal justice reform to save money, DeRoche said, while others "want to save lives. We want to bring families together. We want to see people redeemed."

Michigan lags behind other states in that regard, he said, but he remains optimistic.

"I think Michigan has been demonstrating that what we've spent money on hasn't made us safer."