

The Herald News

America can't afford to wait another day on prison and drug reform

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Can prison reform and an easing of current federal and state drug policy save our ailing economy? Whether you are a Democrat, independent or Republican, the fact of the matter is that it can and it should happen now.

According to the US Department of Justice, the United States of America has more of its citizens in prison cells than any other nation in the world. Currently, 2.3 million people are in the state and federal prison system. The Peoples Republic of China is a far second with 1.6 million in prisons, despite having over four times the current population of the U.S. The 50 individual state prison systems house about 2.1 million prisoners and the Federal government houses 217,582. The Anti Drug Abuse Act of 1986 — better known as the “War on Drugs” as declared by Richard M. Nixon — accounts for 49-50 percent of federal prisoners and 21 percent of state prisoners. Since the passage of the Anti Drug Abuse Act, the US prison population has skyrocketed from 300,000 in 1986 to more than 2.3 million today.

Under today’s regulations, prisons are for housing and feeding and not rehabilitation or personal growth. For instance, in 1993-1994 Pell grants were stripped away from all state and federal inmates. According to the American Tribune, Claiborne Pell stated on the house floor in 1993 that “23,000 out of the 1.3 million then incarcerated (1993/94) availed themselves of Pell grants. The inmates who availed themselves the use of Pell grants had a 65 percent less chance at recidivism as compared to non Pell grant users.”

Most politicians stay away from these two subjects. If the current president took a hard turn on these policies the whole economy of the United States would improve drastically. In the early 1990s there was some minor easing on three esoteric federal drug law applications that proved to have huge disparities in sentencing: the LSD paper weight law, the L versus M methamphetamine law, and weight calculations of non-mature marijuana plants.

But, they only affected a few thousand federal inmates and, although it was a step in the right direction, the overall affect was negligible.

Over 100,000 federal inmates and 441,000 state inmates are being held under the current and barbaric drug laws. According to a study conducted by the Office of Fiscal Analysis (#2008-R-0099) The average state cost for each prisoner per year is roughly \$40,500 (\$29,500 for federal

inmates) or a total cost of more than \$17.5 billion per year for state prisons, and nearly \$3 billion for federal inmates.

America's politicians got it all wrong. According to the ArcView Group, a cannabis industry investment and research firm based in Oakland, California, found that the U.S. market for legal cannabis grew 74 percent in 2014 to \$2.7 billion, up from \$1.5 billion in 2013. Oakland is now offering industrial size permits with a \$211,000 annual permit fee to grow medical marijuana in downtown Oakland.

If the feds eased the laws for drug use for recreational and medical use of just marijuana, the amount of projected revenue for just the federal government would be in the 10's of billions per year. It would create 1 million jobs within two years of the change as long as the states followed suit and, with a federal mandate, states could be forced to change their laws as well. Over 20 states have decriminalized marijuana and or have medical marijuana available to its residents.

By default, hemp is illegal in this country because of the marijuana laws, According to Hemp for Victory by Jack Herer, hemp cannot get you high and does not contain any real amount of THC (the active ingredient in marijuana). If the drug laws are eased the United States, by the federal passage of The Industry Hemp Farming Act, introduced in January of 2015, could legalize hemp production, which at one time was our biggest crop next to tobacco. Currently there is over a \$2 billion global hemp market which, if America became involved on a federal level, would create a estimated 1-2 million jobs over a seven-year period. All the machinery and infrastructure for efficient hemp production and harvest was invented and in use over 80 years ago. Currently the U.S. imports over \$150 million per year in hemp related products.

Spending over \$100 billion on the war on drugs does not, has not, and will not ever stop illegal drug use in this country. When decriminalized, the criminal element would be instantly removed from the equation, thus easing prison budgets around the country and creating more bed space for truly dangerous criminals committing non-consensual crimes, as opposed to consensual crimes. Cocaine and heroine are decriminalized in small amounts in the Netherlands, Portugal, and Mexico. A paper published by the Cato Institute in 2009 posed the question, "Does the new drug policy work in a country that was labeled as the worst European country for heavy drug abusers?" It shows that between 2001 and 2006 rates of lifetime use of any illegal drug among seventh graders to ninth graders fell from 14.9 percent to 10.1 percent, with 16-18 year olds it fell from 2.5 percent to 1.8 percent. This is interesting because I smoked my first joint in seventh grade and was well aware of the "illegality" of it. HIV infections in Portugal for the same time were down 17 percent, as the money saved on enforcement is now funding drug treatment and education.

Let's turn this destruction of our people, in the name of the war on drugs, into the seeds of opportunity with the benefit of jobs and tax revenue — all while lessening the amount of people addicted to drugs.

We can cure some of our social ills. We cannot legislate morality. The worst mistake is one from which nothing is learned.