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CRIME AND LEGAL ISSUES NOTEBOOK

Crime & legal issues notebook: Sen. Webb's bill to review criminal justice system gains support

By Ashley Kelly and Peter Dujardin

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U.S. Sen. Jim Webb's bill to undertake a broad review of the nation's criminal justice system — on the basis that the one we have isn't working — is one step closer to fruition.

Webb's bill — to appoint a "National Crime Commission" of 13 criminal justice experts — calls for a good, hard look at the justice system "from top to bottom." The bill passed the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday and will go now to the Senate floor.

Webb, D-Va., wants a review of everything from drug laws to the treatment of mentally ill inmates to job training programs for prisoners, and everything in between.



Webb talks about how it's unsustainable for taxpayers to simply continue to put more and more people into jails.

The U.S., Webb says, has 5 percent of the world's population but a quarter of its prisoners. There are four times as many mentally ill people imprisoned than in hospitals, he said.

"The overwhelming support from both sides of the aisle for restructuring our criminal justice system is very encouraging for our country," Webb said Thursday. "We are taking an inclusive, broad-based approach here, and ... that's the best way to move our country away from a system based on ideology and fear, and toward what is fair and what keeps us safe."

The bill, which passed on a voice vote out of the committee, has strong bipartisan support and counts groups as diverse as the Fraternal Order of Police, National District Attorneys Association, CATO Institute, NAACP and ACLU are also on board.

For more information about the legislation, go to Webb's Web site at webb.senate.gov.

Comparing marriage to jail?

A prosecutor's point in her closing argument about how men sometimes forget their own wedding anniversaries led to a lighthearted moment at a recent Newport News murder trial.

The argument was over a jailhouse informant — a key prosecution witness — who got a key date wrong.

The informant had said he was "sure" that he overheard the defendant admitting to the crime "between January and March." Problem was, the killing didn't occur until early April.

Defense attorney David B. Olson said in his closing argument that "if there's one thing you remember" as an inmate, it's the exact date of your release.

But Newport News Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Robin L. Farkas, in her following argument, told the jury that people often get their dates wrong, from inmates off by a week to husbands forgetting their wedding anniversary.

Once the jury left to begin their deliberations, Circuit Court Judge H. Vincent Conway Jr. asked Farkas if she was making a point about men in particular. He then asked if she was "comparing marriage to a prison."

"One could make that comparison," Farkas quipped back.

As he stood to walk out of the courtroom into his chambers, Conway said, "By the way, Ms. Farkas," then recited his own anniversary date.

The informant's mix-up didn't prevent the jury from coming back with a manslaughter conviction.

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