
Sandy Martinez: Proposals would reduce recidivism, juvenile arrests

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By Sandy Martinez / Special to The Sun

From our reliance on capital punishment to disparities in sentencing, our criminal justice system is broken. For four months, loyal community members met nearly every week determined to identify and evaluate a long list of criminal justice issues affecting the community.

The issues were divided along the hierarchy of governing law. For instance, laws that apply to capital punishment can only be changed at the state level and not at the local level. After wrestling with all the suggested recommendations, the Gainesville For All criminal justice team was able to narrow down the scope to five areas of recommendations.

Alachua County has the second-to-worst count for disproportionate juvenile arrests in the state of Florida. We support the ongoing development of policies to address arrests of children ages 12 and under by law enforcement agencies in Alachua County. The policy change enables law enforcement to exhaust all alternatives prior to criminally charging children aged 12 and younger with non-violent misdemeanor crimes.

A couple of years ago, all non-violent misdemeanor arrests of children 12 and under were black. There is a 34 percent recidivism rate if a child is criminally charged and an average cost of \$5,000 in court, personal and community costs. By utilizing civil citations programs through teen court, there is less than a 4 percent recidivism rate and an average cost of \$500.

In order to reduce recidivism, our community will need to address the diverse needs of individuals who are released from incarceration. The community should further address banning the box, reviewing the Second Chance Act and related programs, as well as the restoration of civil rights.

The most current recidivism rate for the state is 25 percent and one of the leading reasons for recidivism is the lack of community support. A revamped system may look like a one-stop center for services or programs that involve case management and mentorship.

The most effective way to prevent juvenile delinquency has indisputably been to assist children and their families. We encourage the increase and expansion of wrap-around service programs for middle-school students, as well as additional training for teachers to bring awareness of their implicit biases.

We encourage a broad review of programs to determine the most appropriate programs for implementation in Alachua County. It will benefit students to have several programs that focus on potential support outlets including education, parent-child interaction training, recreation (e.g., drama, the arts, Partners in Adolescent Lifestyle Support Program/PALS, etc.).

We recommend and encourage sustainable and ongoing training for all criminal justice and community stakeholders — including but not limited to judges, district attorneys, court clerks and law enforcement officers — on implicit bias, procedural justice and trauma-informed

response. We should work toward the establishment of best practices that will support and maintain the required training. This will help reduce any sentencing disparity and help protect our community members that work in our judicial system.

Our final recommendation is that city and county commissions work together to expand the adult civil citation program to include not only misdemeanor marijuana possession, but further extend its use to include non-violent misdemeanors. This policy shift will protect people from having criminal records for these civil infractions, working to decrease incarceration costs and reduced racial disparities.

The implementation and adoption of this policy allows for first-time and small offenders to be held accountable for their crimes through a pre-arrest diversion effort, but allows them to avoid criminal records that impact job and/or education placement.

— *Sandy Martinez is chair of the Gainesville For All criminal justice team.*