

Guest column

KEITH WESSEL

# Public getting skewed view of how parole system works



Wessel

The debate in Wisconsin and other states about abolishing parole does a disservice to taxpayers.

In Wisconsin, during the 1994 campaign, both the governor and his opponent advocated abolishing parole because they seem to believe that doing so is desirable to their constituents. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It may be true that taxpayers are disturbed by routine media reports when prison inmates are released on parole. It is not the fact that inmates are released on parole that disturbs these taxpayers.

Rather, they are disturbed because they do not understand the benefit of parole supervision. Their failure to understand can be attributed to the failure of lawmakers to craft sentencing laws that provide the modern media with

*The Criminal Law Association will host a forum Tuesday night to discuss "The Politics of Crime." Speakers will include Rep. Tammy Baldwin; Sen. Gary Drzewiecki; Jackie Austin, who works with prisoners; Michael Sullivan, head of the Department of Corrections; and UW law professor Krista Ralston. The forum will be held from 7 to 9:30 p.m. in Room 260 of the UW Law School.*

adequate "sound bites" to disseminate an understanding of how sentencing laws function.

Unless an inmate is sentenced to life without parole, he or she will eventually be released.

Given a choice between releasing inmates to a parole structure or no such structure, taxpayers will choose the parole structure because doing so provides a system that protects society.

Today in Wisconsin, when an inmate is released on mandatory parole, that inmate is subsequently supervised by the Department of Corrections for a period of time equal to one-third of the inmate's

original sentence.

If the inmate does not cooperate with his or her parole agent, then the agent has discretion to reincarcerate the individual or impose other sanctions.

With this system in place, the Department of Corrections can monitor whether or not the former inmate is adjusting appropriately to being placed in the community. Without parole, the state would be required to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the former inmate committed a new crime in order to sanction that inmate for continued anti-social behavior.

Clearly, then, the current sys-

tem of mandatory parole provides taxpayers with a system that protects society and that is tough on criminals.

Assuming that current opinion sampling that indicates a high degree of concern among voters with regard to crime issues is accurate, one might ask why candidates for governor in Wisconsin and other states would see political capital in advocating the abolishment of parole.

That question can be answered by examining the role of "spin doctors" and the use of "20-second sound bites," which drive the selling of political candidates in the television age.

When political candidates and elected officials rely on voter sampling to spin back to voters what the voters appear to desire, without analysis of the underlying policies, they fail to advance sound policies.

Analysis of criminal sentence

structures suggests that if lawmakers would consider the impact of media coverage of criminal sentencing and release, they could easily draft laws that make it clear to television viewers that releasing inmates to parole provides society with supervision of those inmates and is tough on crime.

Sentencing laws can be drafted in a way that requires judges to announce sentences in a manner that complies with the public's desire for "sound bite" communication.

For example, if judges were required to sentence a convicted criminal to a mandatory period of time in jail (perhaps subject to discretionary parole) and additionally sentence that convicted person to serve a specified time period of on-the-street supervision by the Department of Corrections, then television viewers would better understand the value of parole when broadcasters announce that an inmate has been released on parole.

This is true, because when an inmate is released, the television

announcer would state that: "Inmate (name) was released today after serving the full amount of his or her jail sentence, and inmate (name) will now be required to spend the next "X" number of years being supervised in the community by the Department of Corrections."

A statement such as this can easily be made in less than 20 seconds and makes clear to television viewers why they benefit from parole supervision of convicted criminals.

Politicians who take the safety of their constituents seriously and who advocate positions that are tough on crime should promote the benefits of parole. They should tell their constituents that if elected they will be tough on crime by making sure that convicted criminals are supervised by the state when they are released from prison.

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