Should We Revise Public Safety Budgeting By Eliminating the Favored Status of Prisons?

Almost all public officials have to work within budgets. School board members, City Councilors, police chiefs, directors of parole and probation offices – all have to allocate resources within limited budgets.

There is one exception: prosecutors (and judges) have, in effect. an unlimited budget for prison. When they send someone to prison, the state has to pay the cost – period. Prosecutors and judges don't have to weigh the costs of prison against the value of other public safety interventions. Neither the DA nor the County as a whole gets any benefit from reducing the use of state prisons, or pays any price for increasing the use of prison space.

If we were convinced that sending people to prison is the most important thing society can do, it might make sense for prison to have this favored place. But many criminal justice researchers think that other interventions are often more cost-effective in reducing crime.

Portland City Councilor Novick, Multnomah County Commissioner Vince Jones-Dixon and State Representative Willy Chotzen have been exploring a legislative concept that Councilor Novick and Commissioner Jones-Dixon have asked LPSCC to discuss. What if the state gave each county an *overall* public safety budget – as it gives each school district an overall education budget – and gave the county (or each LPSCC) a choice as to how to spend it? The cost of sending someone to prison would come out of the overall budget. Nothing would stop the county from continuing to send as many people to prison as it did before, if it so chose. But the county would be able to *choose* how much of its overall pot would be spent on prisons, or community corrections, or beefing up local police and sheriff's departments, or restorative justice programs, or mental health or substance abuse diversion programs.

In addition to Vince and Steve, speakers will include:

- Representative Chotzen
- John Roman, who directs the Center for Public Safety and Justice at NORC at the University of Chicago, and is one of the preeminent criminal justice researchers in America.