



Reforms for Inmate Post-Release Support in the age of COVID

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Over the past six months, COVID-19 has highlighted many issues in our society—from the large percentage of the population living paycheck-to-paycheck to racial inequities. In the criminal justice arena, there has also been a call for the release of inmates across the country to limit the potential spread of the pandemic in facilities. While most can agree that non-violent offenders who are not a threat to society should be released during this

time, we also must ensure that those being released have every opportunity to continue their path of rehabilitation.

In Florida, there are well over 10,000 cases of COVID in prison facilities across the state, making it imperative that we safely and smartly remove non-violent inmates from the prison population. One simple step could be to identify all those eligible for parole and release them as soon as possible to keep them safe. Removing individuals

from prison populations is important, but it's equally important to keep them safe once they're in society.

Historically, the state of Florida has had a plethora of challenges in ensuring that released inmates are ready for life on the outside. Upon release, returning citizens have been provided with some clothes, a bus pass, and a small amount of money for them to get started—but these are not sufficient tools to set someone on the right path, especially in the age of COVID. More troubling is the fact that officials estimate¹ as many as a third of returning citizens will have no direct family or friends to lean on. How can we expect these newly freed individuals to succeed if they do not have support from Florida or from people close to them? This will almost certainly lead to recidivism and could contribute to an even higher number of COVID cases at a time when we can least afford it.

We should be looking at ways that we can fight recidivism, prevent the further spread of this virus, and help those who are trying to better themselves. This is where the commitment to free enterprise and market competition can and will offer

concrete solutions. Organizations like the GEO Group have invested in solutions to this challenge and they can serve as a model not only for these times, but also going forward. I know this because I've seen it in action firsthand. GEO's continuum of care initiative works with individuals before they are released to provide them with job training, drug and alcohol classes, therapy, as well as a good deal of other programming to combat recidivism. Post-release, they work to provide housing, jobs, and stability through constant contact with their case managers.

Investing in providing a better life and more opportunities for reformed inmates is the right thing to do and it will help Florida's bottom line as well. It costs over \$30,000 a year to house inmates. If we can provide the tools for people to start families, find jobs, and contribute to society, the state can save millions by lowering the recidivism rate even a few percentage points. This is not big government—it's strategic government.

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REFERENCES

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