



THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF SOUTH CAROLINA

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South Carolina Attorney General Henry McMaster has proposed a bill that would make drastic changes to the criminal justice system in South Carolina. The bill would end parole for all state crimes, just as the federal legal system and the sole state of Virginia currently do. The McMaster bill would also establish a new “middle court” between probation and prison judicial options. Prosecutors and judges would have the discretion to allow some criminals an opportunity to stay in the community and reform under the scrutiny of the court, much as drug courts do today. Failure to reform would lead to prison without parole.

The League of Women Voters of South Carolina has carefully considered Attorney General McMaster’s bill and prefers an alternative bill that has received far less publicity. S 144 would create a commission to review, study and recommend legislation to the General Assembly regarding sentencing guidelines and the parole system. The commission would present alternative sentencing procedures for non-violent offenders. The commission’s recommendations potentially might include the McMaster ideas. Then state legislators would deliberate the recommendations and add the benefit of their own experience and wisdom before revising current laws.

The League believes that problems in the South Carolina criminal justice system are too many and complex to be solved by the McMaster plan to end parole and establish a major new court program, although we think the middle court idea may have merit. We want a thorough study of South Carolina’s criminal justice problems and criminal laws to be done before enacting such sweeping changes.

We certainly want to see non-partisan, objective studies of the effects of no-parole in Virginia and the federal prison system. We want to know why Virginia now faces the need to build a new prison every year, why the United States holds the world’s record for putting people in prison, and why that record prison population increases annually. We want to know what other states are successfully doing to reduce prison populations.

Furthermore, our League study has convinced us that not only new sentencing guidelines are needed. We believe there should be state legislation and funding for a rehabilitation-directed corrections system. Our state prisons and jails currently warehouse mentally ill offenders who should be in mental health facilities. Literacy and job training programs, substance abuse and anger management treatment, are critically needed in our prisons and jails for all criminal offenders, not just a current selected few. South Carolina prisoners badly need post-release help to find jobs, housing, ongoing substance abuse treatment, transportation and medical care.

The League believes the state, while reforming South Carolina’s sentencing and corrections practices, should keep in mind the goals we all want when prisoners are released back to the community—less crime and more productive citizens. We are hopeful that a well-designed

sentencing guidelines commission, with a comprehensive mandate as proposed by S144, would come up with better ideas than the McMaster proposals.

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