

Andre Brown of Project Return talks about problems released prisoners face finding employment during a WISDOM forum Wednesday at the state Capitol in Madilson. The group of religious leaders and activists presented examples and strategies aimed at reforming the state's prison system. all crimes, not just violent



Christine Dankmeyer (foreground) of Madison listens during the forum. WISDOM's ideas are part of a plan called "11x15 Blueprint for Ending Mass Incarceration in Wisconsin."

Group presents strategies to reduce inmate population

By GINA BARTON

gbarton@journalsentinel.com

Wisconsin should look to other states for cre- to get jobs. ative ways to reduce its prison population, according to a group of religious leaders and activists known as WISDOM.

Iowa has changed its legislative practices, rechanges in sentencing law or the criminal code Blueprint for Ending Mass Incarceration in would have on the community.

solitary confinement — under the direction of a time of sentencing how long former Wisconsin corrections secretary.

Hawaii has deemed it illegal to ask about felony convictions on employment applications, making it easier for people released from prison

During a demonstration Wednesday at the state Capitol, more than 100 representatives of WISDOM presented these examples and other strategies to corrections officials and legislators quiring lawmakers to consider the impact as part of a document they are calling the "11x15

thor of Truth-in-Sentencing that eliminated parole because of that belief. He mentioned that when he ran in 2010, and he is keeping his promise to the people of Wisconsin."

Many other states have rolled back their truth-insentencing laws in recent

tencing law is among the toughest in the nation. Under the law, which took effect Dec. 31, 1999, prisoners must serve every day of the sentence imposed by a judge. Unlike many other states, which reserve truth in sentencing for serious offenses, Wisconsin's law applies to

mete out justice fairly behind prison walls and help people avoid going back to prison after they are releas-

Wisconsin's truth-in-sen-

ones. Inmates get no credit for good behavior.

Gov. Scott Walker authored the legislation when he served in the Assembly.

A Milwaukee Journal Sentinel analysis published in 2004 found that both prison and extended supervision time significantly increased under truth in sentencing. The trend shows no sign of abating.

Walker has declined interview requests. His spokeswoman, Laurel Patrick, did not answer questions about whether he had any plans to reduce the state's prison population or whether he had any response to the 11x15 campaign.

Instead, she reiterated an earlier statement, which read, in part: "Gov. Walker believes that the public -

and most importantly - vic-

Colorado has dramatically reduced its use of tims deserve to know at the "Gov. Walker was the au-

years, in part due to the huge cost of mass incarceration. In some states, including Iowa, legislators now receive not only fiscal impact statements about those costs, but also "community impact statements" to help them figure out what the consequences of criminalizing behaviors or toughening minimum sentences might be.

predict the impact that laws and guidelines will have on various communities, including communities of color, people with disabilities and low-income people," the blueprint says. Community Impact Statements would not favor any particular action - they would simply aid legislators and the general public in understanding how different actions would affect different communities."

State Rep. Sandy Pasch (D. such a bill months ago, but it who was murdered by an in. 20s. The cost of keeping them hope inside the walls and dewent nowhere.

Solitary opposed

People sent to prison — becontends.

prisoners in solitary confinement at any given time consin's corrections depart- outside. was 1,469, according to a sure ment from 2007 to 2011. trators.

2012 survey shows Wiscon- e, according to WISDOM. sin held more than 600 pristhan 10 years.

ineffective, immoral, dan-custody. gerous and very expensive," the blueprint says.

dropped from 1,500 in 2011 to lives," the blueprint says. fewer than 500 this year,



"We have professionals Mark Rice talks about how mental health treatments could be improved in Wisconsin prisons during and available data that can a WISDOM forum in the state Capitol in Madison.



leaving the Legislature at The Rev. Jerry Hancock, president of WIDSOM's Madison affiliate, said the state's high prison the end of the year, proposed talks about how the blueprint shows that reform is possible.

"Depending on your viewin solitary confinement, and would do what we can to be 2005 to 152 in 2013. those sentenced before that sure someone is punished selaw took effect deserve a fair verely," he told the Journal Post-prison prospects . chance for parole, WISDOM Sentinel earlier this year.

According to United Na- partment of Corrections offi- job applications. tions international stand-cials), the state's prisoners "A 'yes' answer usually

therefore could be eligible their life around." "Solitary confinement is for parole, yet remain in As a result, former pris-

In Colorado, the number them a fair chance to be prison. of prisoners in solitary has freed and get on with their

largely due to the efforts of role-eligible inmates are ers cannot ask applicants Rick Raemisch, executive di- black, compared with 6.5% about their criminal historector of the prison system of the state's population and ries until the end of the selecthere. His efforts continued 43% of all male inmates, tion process. those of his predecessor, More than half committed "When criminal backtheir crimes in their teens of ground checks are done lat-

mate released directly from locked up is about \$100 milsolitary back to the com-lion a year, paid by state tax-

Parole grants have defore or after truth in sentenc- point, one might think be- creased dramatically in reing — should not be housed cause of what happened, we cent years — from 1,146 in mane state. We can keep

Those few who are parol "Instead, we want to make ed, and those released after As of 2012, the most recent sure people are safer, not serving a set prison term unfigure available, the average that prisoners will be worse der truth in sentencing, number of Wisconsin male than when they came in." have a hard time finding Raemisch supervised Wis- jobs and succeeding on the

One reason, according to vey by the Association of In addition to being kept WISDOM, is that Wisconsin State Correctional Adminis- out of solitary (called "segre- employers are allowed to ask gation" by Wisconsin De- about felony convictions on

ards, holding someone in who were sentenced under means instant disqualificasolitary for more than 15 the old parole system need to tion," the blueprint says. days constitutes torture. The be given a fair shot at releas- "The applicant is denied even if they are highly qual-About 2,700 people incar- ified and motivated, even if oners in solitary for six to 12 cerated in Wisconsin were their crime was years ago or months, and 14 had been held sentenced before truth in has nothing to do with the in those conditions for more sentencing took effect and job, even if they have turned

oners have no way to sup-"A broken, out-of-control port themselves and often prison system has denied end up on welfare or back in

States such as Minnesota and Hawaii have "banned Forty-five percent of pa- the box," meaning employ-

er, qualified applicants can respond and explain," the blueprint says. "After that conversation, the employer can decide whether or not to deny them the job."

The Rev. Jerry Hancock, president of WISDOM's Madison affiliate, said he hopes the blueprint shows Walker and the incoming Legislature change is possible. Hancock, a lawyer and minister who formerly served as an assistant state attorney general,

"What it does is destroys stroys families outside the walls, and that just erodes all faith in government at every level," he said. "We can do better. We can be a more hufamilies and communities together, and that's the way Wisconsin can move forward."

