

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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Attorney General Brad Schimmel Doesn't  
Know What He's Talking About

Right wing ideologue (and current Wisconsin Attorney General) Brad Schimmel was quoted in the newspaper as saying he's "stunned at the irresponsible proposals made" by Democratic gubernatorial candidates who are calling for cutting the state's prison population in half.

Frankly, Mr. Schimmel doesn't know what he's talking about when he decries releasing violent offenders. All Mr. Schimmel ever sees are recently convicted defendants who are being sent to prison. And yes, many of them have committed violent crimes. But Mr. Schimmel has no idea what happens to those prisoners in the decades following their arrival in the prison system.

I have spent 34 years in prison for stabbing a man in a fight. I have been eligible for parole for 22 years, spent 9 years in minimum security and community custody (which included 19 months of work release). I have a perfect conduct record and earned a bachelor's degree while in prison. In 2010, I drove a state van over 30,000 unescorted throughout northwestern Wisconsin taking men to their work release sites. I am now 64 years old.

In 2011, I expected to be released on parole. Instead, I was returned to medium security within a week of Scott Walker becoming governor and have been held in Stanley prison since then. I have proved I am not a risk to anybody but because I was convicted of a violent crime in 1984, I am being warehoused indefinitely.

Let me tell you what I've seen since coming to Stanley: hundreds of old men who have languished for decades in prison for no apparent reason. They long ago ceased being a risk to anyone. There are so many of them suffering health problems the prison hires younger prisoners to push them around in wheel chairs because they are too infirm to walk anywhere.

They have upper and lower bunks in the cells but there is a constant scramble to keep enough prisoners in Stanley who can climb to an upper bunk because the lower bunks are full of old and crippled prisoners. These men may have committed terrible crimes decades ago but they are long past the point where they can pose a risk to anyone.

Who is getting released? The young men who come to prison for drug-related crimes. The same ones who are demographically most likely to reoffend. They get a slap on the wrist, early release through the Earned Release Program and are often back in prison with a new offense within a year. It is not the old man who committed a violent crime 20 years ago that you have to worry about. It's the young men who have gotten a little taste of prison and are willing to roll the dice - drive-by shootings, mega-drug deals, car jacking, and everything else that goes with a criminal lifestyle.

Meanwhile, old men are dying in prison every day, denied compassionate release, parole or clemency - all so ideologues like AG Schimmel and Gov. Walker can win elections by fear-mongering and touting their bankrupt tough-on-crime policies.

It's time to restore sanity to the criminal justice system. Cut the prison population in half. Release all the old, harmless prisoners, divert drug addicts to treatment programs and stop the incessant march toward ever more harsh prison conditions in the name of security.