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OUR OPINION

Prison reform a daunting task

But Nathan Manning good choice for panel tasked with reducing state's inmates

Nathan Manning is part of what's likely to be an exercise in, if not futility, then humility.

Manning, of North Ridgeville, a Republican new to the state House, has been appointed to a panel charged with re-examining Ohio's criminal justice laws with an eye toward reducing the number of people going to prison.

It has an unmemorable name, the Criminal Justice Recodification Committee, and an unenviable task, or at least one that only a lawyer could love: to review the state's entire criminal code, whose magnitude state Senate President Keith Faber illustrated Thursday by standing next to five thick volumes.

Which is not to say that the task is mere busywork — it isn't; Ohio (and the nation, for that matter) hold too many people in prison and need to find alternatives — or that the assignment amounted to the hazing of a freshman legislator — it didn't; as a lawyer and a former city prosecutor, Manning is well-equipped for the job.

What makes it daunting, aside from its sheer scope, is that others have tried and failed to cut the state's prison population.

Changes in sentencing laws initiated in 2011 with the support of Gov. John Kasich, for example, slowed but did not reverse growth of the prison population. They were aimed at keeping more first-time, nonviolent offenders out of prison and were forecast to cut the population to around 47,000 by this year, but Ohio had about 50,400 inmates last month.

Part of the reason for the failure was the state's heroin epidemic, which led to new prosecutions.

Crime and punishment are always subject to new trends, making it difficult to devise surefire ways to reduce the prison population. But the rising cost of incarcerating so many people, from the impact on the state budget to the impact on the lives of inmates, their families and their communities, demands a concerted effort to address the issue.

Ohio is getting just that, with groups as divergent as the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans for Tax Reform, Grover Norquist's group, participating in the announcement of the effort in Columbus. Holly Harris, executive director of the U.S. Justice Action Network, which is headquartered in Washington and is promoting Ohio's effort, said polls show that the public in the state supports changing the system, too.

Even the writer Piper Kerman is involved. She's the ex-felon whose memoir about time she spent in prison is the basis for the Netflix series "Orange is the New Black," which is about a women's prison. Kerman has recently moved to Columbus and teaches nonfiction writing to inmates in Marion and Marysville.

Manning doesn't have her star power, but he's in a position to make a difference. It won't be easy. Success is anything but guaranteed. But past failures don't excuse a surrender to the status quo.

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