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As state approaches highest total incarceration in U.S., Oklahomans for Criminal Justice Reform ramps up advocacy efforts

OKLAHOMA CITY - With Oklahoma potentially mere days away from becoming the highest incarcerating state in the country, Oklahomans for Criminal Justice Reform (OCJR) today announced new plans for aggressive advocacy for long-term improvements to the state's broken criminal justice system. OCJR's long-term plan for reform in Oklahoma starts with legislative approval this session of the Oklahoma Justice Reform Task Force recommendations.

The coalition - comprised of a broad range of conservative organizations and individuals across the state, including law enforcement officers, elected officials, and business and community leaders - packed a standing-room-only State Capitol event on Wednesday to announce its support for the full Task Force plan and its intention to work with stakeholders on a long-term strategy to implement criminal justice reform in Oklahoma. OCJR's board of directors also today [released a letter](#), which appeared in advertising in *The Oklahoman* and *Tulsa World*, calling attention to the growing problem and urging swift action.

"We are not going away because this issue is not going away," said **Kris Steele, chairman of OCJR and a former Republican speaker of the Oklahoma House**. "Being on track to be worst in the nation in incarceration is the ultimate motivator to get all hands on deck to solve this crisis. Our coalition is all-in this session, and for important efforts to come, because Oklahoma families deserve and demand better than we're getting from our justice system today."

On Wednesday, multiple members of the coalition reiterated their dedication to evidence-based criminal justice reform policies that save taxpayer dollars, safely reduce incarceration, reinvest savings in alternatives and treatment, and preserve and strengthen families.

"It's time for Oklahoma to reign in skyrocketing prison growth to ensure tax dollars are better spent while improving our workforce and public safety. Other states have done it, and so can we," added **Larry Nichols, chairman emeritus of Devon Energy Corp.**

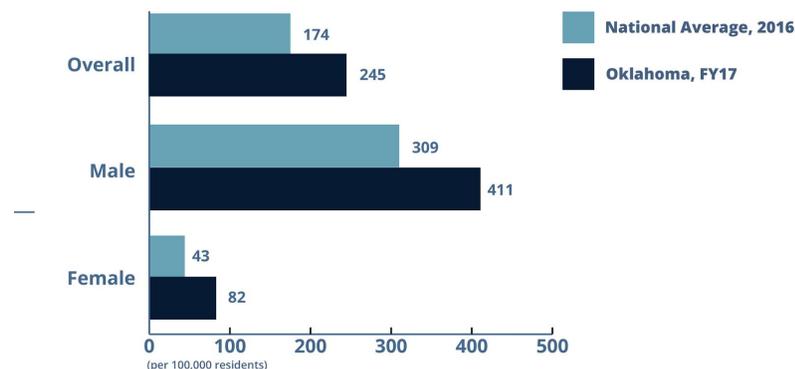
More than 30 states have passed plans similar to Oklahoma's that reinvest and redirect resources currently spent on lengthy prison terms in programming to address the root causes of criminal behavior in order to reduce crime and better reintegrate formerly incarcerated individuals into their communities, while protecting taxpayer dollars.

In 2016, the Task Force made 27 recommendations to address Oklahoma’s mass incarceration challenges. This session, legislation is again being considered to enact its plan, which will save nearly \$2 billion by averting the 25 percent prison population growth projected in the next decade. OCJR will advocate strongly to pass the full critical components of the plan.

“These bills stop the bleeding by stopping prison growth, but they don’t save the patient. It’s imperative that the bills have their full impacts included if we want to avoid building more prisons,” Steele said. “We know there is strong legislative will to rise to the occasion even in the face of opposition from those who seek to maintain the indefensible status quo.”

With state prisons at 113 percent capacity, Oklahoma is poised to surpass Louisiana to become the highest incarcerating state in the nation in total incarceration. [New analysis by FWD.us](#) reveals that in FY2017, Oklahoma sent 91 percent more women to prison per capita than the national average, and held people in prison 80 percent longer for drug and property crimes.

Oklahoma Prison Admission Rates Higher than National Average



The Task Force’s policies would free up resources for prison alternatives and treatment such as the highly-successful Tulsa-based Women in Recovery program, which keeps women out of prison while holding them accountable as they learn how to transition back into society.

“It was life-changing,” **Women in Recovery graduate Kandice Nowak** said at Wednesday’s

event. “Women in Recovery helped me work through my past trauma and make healthy decisions. The program taught me how to live life as a healthy, productive individual again.” Nowak now works as a peer support specialist at Family and Children’s Services in Tulsa, is married with a son, and recently became a homeowner. “I hope more people can have the same hand up I received through similar diversion programs,” she said.

About Oklahomans for Criminal Justice Reform

OCJR is a bipartisan coalition of community leaders and experts from across the state working to safely reduce incarceration, save taxpayer dollars, and make Oklahoma’s communities safer by addressing the root causes of crime. It is comprised of some of Oklahoma’s most prominent faith leaders, law enforcement, elected officials, health professionals, and business leaders. To learn more, visit <https://okjusticereform.org/>.