

From: Daniel Pirkel
To: APWA
Re: Reinstating Good Time¹

The yearly operating budget of the Michigan Department of Corrections is over 2 billion dollars, consuming a 19% of the State's general fund. This is far more than what Michigan spends on education. While no one doubts the necessity of prisons, reducing expenditures without sacrificing public safety and security is possible.

In recent years, Michigan's legislators have considered various reforms but have passed few laws to significantly impact the prison system. This stagnation revolves around the negative emotions that crime generates, making prison reform unpopular for politicians. Furthermore, discerning which policies are the most effective at preventing future crime is difficult. Nevertheless, the benefits of some reforms are self-evident. According to Dora Schriro in "Is Good time a Good Idea? A Practitioner's Perspective," good time encourages prisoners to engage in prosocial behavior, such as remaining misconduct free and participating in rehabilitation programs.² The Rand Corporation's MetaAnalysis of correctional education (spanning 32 years of research) has demonstrated that education reduces recidivism by 43%, thereby saving taxpayers the cost of re-incarceration while fostering public safety via crime prevention. Additionally, awarding prisoners time reductions towards their sentences for good behavior, reduces recidivism rates in and of itself.³ Good time simply provides prisoners incentive to develop good habits that help them lead productive, law abiding lives.

Despite this evidence, Michigan is only one out of six states that do not offer any type of good time to its state prison population, regardless of whether it is based on meritorious conduct or earned through graduating from an educational program such as college.⁴ However, time reductions are presently available to inmates housed in Michigan's county jails (they earn one-day credit for every six days served without disciplinary issues).⁵ Despite this, many Michigan voters have no idea that state prisoners sentenced after 2001 cannot earn any type of sentence reductions for good behavior, short of

¹ Also published in the "Chimes," on 5-4-18 and it can be viewed at www.calvinchimes.org

² "Is Good Time a Good Idea? A Practitioner's Perspective" by Dora Schriro; Source: Federal Sentencing Reporter, Vol. 21, No. 3, ABA Roundtable on "Second Look" Sentencing Reforms (February 2009), pp. 179-181; Published by: University of California Press on behalf of the Vera Institute of Justice

³ Id. at 179

⁴ "Good Time and Earned Time Policies for State Prison Inmates," National Conference of State Legislatures- the Forum for America's Ideas (2016)

⁵ MCL § 51.282

an extremely rare executive commutation or pardon. In essence, incarcerated people must serve their minimum no matter what they do, or how they change.

Opponents of good time argue that it reduces prosecutorial and legislative discretion.⁶ While true, good time also empowers correctional officials to reduce the sentences of prisoners who are no longer a threat to society. Furthermore, any argument that good time endangers Michigan's communities fails, for the parole board still has discretion to refuse to parole prisoners until they reach their maximum sentence, which is often five to fifty years longer than their minimum. By this time, even the hardest criminals "age out" of their wayward life.

Recognizing the benefits good time offers Michigan and its prison population, Representatives Martin Howrylak (R) and David LaGrand (D) recently introduced House Bills 5665, 5666, and 5667 to reinstitute good time. However, Representative Klint Kesto (R), the chair of the Law and Justice Committee, will decide whether or not the bills will be voted on. The legislation provides prisoners time reductions, beginning with five days earned per month for the first two years, gradually increasing to fifteen days earned per month by the time a prisoner has served twenty years. Good time is only earned during months where prisoners are major misconduct free. Some people may oppose offering any type of leniency towards people serving time for a serious crime, or applying good time credits to those who are already serving time. However, studies show that people convicted of violent crimes are less likely to recidivate than either drug or property offenders.⁷ Furthermore, applying this law retroactively allows prison administrators to quickly and safely reduce Michigan's prison population, which currently hovers around 40,000 in order to close down several prisons. This instant savings can be used for things that the State desperately needs, such as improving its schools and roads.

Criminal justice reform in Michigan is primed for reducing government waste and decreasing crime rates. Michigan residents who want Michigan to begin a **Smart on Crime** approach should contact their State Legislator today to support the passage of the Good Time bills. Rep. Klint Kesto, the chair of the Law and Justice Committee, should especially be contacted, as he will decide whether or not the bills are voted on in 2018. In case the legislature fails to act, volunteers have begun to circulate Petitions to force it onto the ballot. If you are interested in signing a petition, or volunteering to obtain signatures, go to <http://sawarimi.org/archives/1775>.

⁶ Schiro at Pg. 179

⁷ See "Paroling People Who Committed Serious crimes: What is the Actual Risk?" by Barbara Levine, Associate Director of Citizens Alliance on Prison and Public Spending, and Elsie Kettunen, Data Analyst (2014)