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Auditor General DePasquale Announces Plans for Special Report on Criminal Justice Reform in Pennsylvania

HARRISBURG – Citing a need for taking a commonsense approach to making sure the punishment fits the crime, Auditor General Eugene DePasquale today announced plans to produce a special report on the benefits to society and savings to taxpayers resulting from criminal justice reform.

“We need to build on the success of Pennsylvania’s recently enacted Clean Slate law and focus on other ways in which we can make our justice system more effective and fair,” DePasquale said. “Not only is it the right thing to do from a fiscal standpoint, it’s also the socially responsible way forward.”

DePasquale noted that Pennsylvania’s incarceration rate is higher than that of Russia, Iran or Turkey as well as many U.S. states.

“With the highest incarceration rate in the Northeastern U.S., Pennsylvania holds roughly 47,000 people in state prisons on any given day,” DePasquale said. “State prison costs rose by 50 percent from 2006 to 2015, from \$1.6 billion to \$2.4 billion.”

DePasquale said he will examine whether sentencing non-violent offenders to prison is putting a strain on the correctional system and driving extra costs to taxpayers.

“Nearly 70 percent of prison sentences are handed out for misdemeanor crimes, which means more than 30,000 people who committed low-level, usually nonviolent crimes are clogging our prisons,” DePasquale said. “Prison time should be reserved for more serious offenders and those who pose a threat to society.”

Any money saved through sentencing reform could be invested in diversionary education and drug-treatment programs, which DePasquale said can reduce recidivism and help past offenders become productive members of society.

Other related issues that DePasquale plans to explore include:

- The societal impact of high incarceration rates, especially for nonviolent offenders;
- The availability of legal counsel for all defendants;
- Whether reforms are needed to the Board of Pardons or its processes;
- The role that cash bail plays in keeping people incarcerated unnecessarily before trial;
- Whether the state’s civil asset forfeiture process should be reformed or replaced; and
- Whether it is prudent to hold inmates past the end of their minimum sentences.

DePasquale’s special report on criminal justice reform is expected to be completed by fall. Learn more about the Department of the Auditor General online at www.pauditor.gov.

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