



THE DEFENDER

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Pushing Criminal Justice Reform in the Legislature

Harsher laws do not translate into a safer society. They only fill our prisons at a terrible financial and human cost.

The legislative session started off on a promising note with Gov. Terry Branstad delivering a Condition of the State address that called for reforming Iowa's criminal justice system to reduce racial disparities.

Criminal justice reform is among the ACLU of Iowa's top legislative priorities and for good reason: Iowa has more than 8,000 inmates in nine state prisons and about 31,000 offenders supervised in community corrections programs statewide. African-Americans constitute 25.3 percent of Iowa's prison population, while they comprise only 3.3 percent of the state's overall population.

But Branstad's message was met with skepticism by many prison reform advocates, including the ACLU of Iowa. Part of the



Considering The Right to Call 911

An Iowa Senate subcommittee considers amendments to the Right to Assistance bill, a priority bill of the ACLU of Iowa. It would prevent domestic abuse and other crime victims from being threatened with eviction or penalties for calling police. ACLU of Iowa Legislative Counsel Pete McRoberts is seated at far right. Read more about the Right to Assistance bill on page 2.

skepticism was that his call for criminal justice reform is in stark contrast with a legislative mindset that seems set on taking a tough-on-crime stance. This stance is held despite overwhelming evidence that harsher laws do not make us safer—they only fill our

prisons at a rate that our state cannot afford and wrongly destroy the lives of inmates, families, and communities.

In the 2015 session, for example, the Iowa General Assembly considered more than 100

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Working for Driver's Licenses for All Iowa Immigrants

Immigrants, regardless of status, should have licenses to make roads safer and lives better.

The ACLU of Iowa has been a leader in forming a coalition of law enforcement, businesses, insurance, victims' advocates, and immigrants' rights groups to push for legislation that would create a driver's license for Iowa immigrants, regardless of their status.

The license would require passing the Iowa driving test and obtaining insurance.

Bills have been introduced in both chambers of the Iowa Legislature that would provide for such a license. House File 2318, introduced by Rep. John Kooiker (R-Boyden) and Senate Study Bill 1092 by Sen. Steve Soddors (D-State Center) would

provide for such licenses to be issued by the Iowa Department of Transportation.

Called Temporary Visitor's Driver's Licenses (TVDLs), they would make roads safer for all Iowans and life easier for thousands of unauthorized Iowans.

Makes Roads Safer for All

This type of driver's license for aspiring citizens would have important road safety benefits. Getting a driver's license requires learning the rules of the road and being tested on those rules. This makes the roads safer for everyone.

In fact, an AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety report found that unlicensed drivers are almost 5 times more likely to be in a fatal crash than are validly licensed drivers.

Having a license also allows an aspiring citizen to get insurance, which financially

protects not only the holder of the license but also anyone involved in an accident with that driver.

Adopted in Other States

Eleven other states, as well as Puerto Rico and Washington D.C., have successfully adopted similar licenses.

In Iowa, such licenses are particularly needed because in rural areas and small towns, driving is the only way to get around. Even in harsh weather and often with babies and children, Iowans often have no option but to drive to get to schools, churches, doctors, and grocery stores.

Immigrants who are stopped and do not have licenses can be fined hundreds of dollars for driving without a license.

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