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The Missouri State Capitol building in Jefferson City (Wikimedia Commons/KTrimble)



by Mary Ann McGivern

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Jefferson City, Mo. â?? March 11, 2019

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On Ash Wednesday, I drove the two and a half hours to Jefferson City to advocate for some criminal justice legislation. I was in the car by 5:30 a.m. to make an 8 a.m. meeting with the chair of the Missouri House of Representatives' Special Committee on Criminal Justice. He was delayed by another meeting, but there were plenty of representatives for me to speak with.

Missouri legislators have term limits — an idea that may sound good at first hearing, but in practice means that a quarter of the legislators are always new and have no experience and no sense of legislative history. For example, almost all of them come into office determined to be tough on crime, not understanding that because all their predecessors were tough on crime, Missouri has longer sentences than most states and that the prison population has risen even while crime rates have dropped.

It was news to some legislators that crime rates have dropped. [Here are the figures.](#) Crime has been decreasing from a high in 1994 when the population was 5,278,000, with 39,240 violent crimes, 240,898 property crimes and 554 murders. In 2016, with a population of 6,093,000, there were 31,644 violent crimes, 170,549 property crimes and 537 murders.

I was one of a group of 16, charged with meeting the freshmen in the House and making the case for [HB 352](#). This bill would grant the Board of Probation and Parole authority to grant parole to persons serving life sentences who are older than age 65 and have served more than 30 years in prison. It is not a "get out of jail" card. It depends on the parole board's decision, case by case.

There is resistance to this bill. Victims and their families would have to be notified of the parole hearings and bad memories would be raised. Here are the issues: Should old cases be reviewed, recognizing that mistakes were made and harsh sentencing was the fashion? Should old cases be reviewed, recognizing that people change? The heinousness of the crime will never change and a life taken cannot be restored. But can a time come when punishment ends?

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I chair the [Criminal Justice Task Force](#) for Empower Missouri. We are advocating for a good 16 bills in the House and the Senate. The chair of the Missouri House Special Committee on Criminal Justice, Rep. Shamed Dogan, is doing a fine job of shepherding them through committee hearings and onto the floor. Two of them on reducing mandatory minimums and ending state licensing requirements that bar persons with felony convictions have already passed the House and moved on to the Senate.

But when I finally met with Dogan, he said that perhaps as many as 20 bills being considered in the House create new crimes and add years in prison for enhanced circumstances such a gang membership. Not everyone in the legislature has gotten the message that Missouri prison sentences are already too long.

Nonetheless, it was a good day. We were there to make our case in person and we did it! But at the end, I was so tired I couldn't find my car in the parking garage and a kind gentleman drove me down the levels until we spotted it â?? the one with bumper stickers.

[Loretto Sr. Mary Ann McGivern works with people who have felony convictions and advocates for criminal justice. She lives in St. Louis.]