

Fiscal Highlights

Justice Efforts for the 2017 General Session - Alexander R. Wilson

With the 2017 General Session just around the corner, the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice (CCJJ), Executive Offices and Criminal Justice appropriations subcommittee (EOCJ), and the Juvenile Justice Working Group are working full force to decide the future of Utah's Justice system.

The CCJJ has been at the forefront of this discussion, and has published a report discussing the results of the Justice Reinvestment Initiative passed into law during the 2015 General Session. The report claims that the effects of the law are hard to measure due to the short time frame since implementation. However, the report is still able to show some short-term effects and predict some long-term effects. It does so by measuring implementation performance measures, direct impact performance measures, and indirect performance measures.

The results of this report were fully hashed out in the EOCJ subcommittee meeting, chaired by Representative Eric Hutchings. A key finding in the report showed that the goal of reducing the prison population by reserving beds for violent and high risk offenders has been successful. In line with this finding, the report showed that New Court Commitments have significantly decreased over the past two years and since the implementation of JRI, but minority New Court Commitments have remained relatively constant. The committee made it clear that race issues in the Utah Criminal Justice System are not intentional and "any idea about how to solve race problems will be entertained" by the committee. Much of the discussion in the subcommittee meeting centered around the report's finding that though prison admission rates have decreased, mental health and substance abuse treatment levels have remained relatively even and have even had a slight reduction in admissions and clients served. This is a large concern to the initiative as it focuses on rehabilitation of low level offenders.

In addition to the discussion around the recent report, the Juvenile Justice Working Group has now taken strong consideration of the juvenile justice system. On October 21st, the working group convened to discuss the results of the breakout groups which examined individual pieces of the system, such as pre-adjudication procedures. Though the final recommendations are still being adjusted, the working group presented many areas of systemic improvement. Most recommendations focused on giving youth alternative options to detention. Some of these included options from pre-court referral services, house arrest, and other sanctions and treatment not amounting to detention time.

It is clear from the current conversations that some action will be recommended during the 2017 General Session and legislators would do well to educate themselves on the subjects in order to make informed decisions while voting on the floor. The work of the CCJJ, EOCJ, and the Working Group will surely be important to Utah's future