

Edwards says efforts should focus on non-violent offenders

Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - April 26, 2017

- Author/Byline: Julia O'Donoghue jodonoghue@nola.com
- Edition: NO Times-Picayune
- Section: NATIONAL
- Page: A02

Gov. John Bel Edwards said he and the Legislature's efforts to reduce Louisiana's incarceration rate should focus on non-violent crime. His and others' comments last week indicate the state doesn't seem poised to shorten sentences for serious offenses or curb the so-called lifer population in its prisons during the 2017 legislative session.

"We are trying to the maximum extent possible to focus our efforts on non-violent offenders, like those individuals who have been convicted of low-level drug crimes or property crimes for example," Edwards said in an interview with The Times-Picayune's editorial board Thursday.

The governor's comments came on the same day that the Louisiana Sheriffs Association released its first public statement on the efforts in the Legislature this spring to lower the state's prison population. The governor is pushing 10 bills — and some administrative changes that don't require lawmakers' approval — aimed at reducing Louisiana's prison population by about 4,800 people and saving the state \$151 million over the next 10 years.

The sheriff's statement emphasized opposition to the proposed changes that would reduce prison stays or shorten sentences for offenders convicted of violent crimes. But the group also said providing more parole opportunities and leniency for non-violent offenders would be appropriate.

The Louisiana District Attorneys Association — which has been the most vocal opponent of reworking the criminal justice system — also softened its rhetoric when it comes to some of the recommendations. The group had released a lengthy statement earlier this month that showed it opposed most of the governor's criminal justice package, including much of what was aimed at helping shorten sentences for non-violent criminals. But the district attorneys met again this past week to revise their positions, according to Pete Adams, the executive director of their association.

The district attorneys new set of comments on the governor's package dial down the opposition to some of the governor's proposals that would open up more opportunities for non-violent offenders. Like the sheriffs, though, the prosecutors said they would fight any proposal to provide more leniency to people convicted of violent crimes.

Most of Edwards' legislative package aimed at reducing Louisiana's incarceration rate is actually focused on non-violent prisoners. The portion of Edwards' package dealing with violent crimes wasn't even factored into \$154 million state savings estimate — or the 4,800 estimated drop in the prison population — because it was acknowledged that those changes were controversial and might not be approved.

Edwards said he met with both district attorneys and sheriffs last week to talk through his criminal justice proposals. The governor has a good relationship with the sheriffs in particular. His brother, Daniel Edwards, is the sheriff of Tangipahoa Parish and the sheriffs association endorsed him during the governor's race over Republican Sen. David Vitter in 2015.

"In many cases, what we are finding out is, our goals aren't different," Edwards said of his conversations with the sheriffs.

The governor said he might be willing to make the adjustments to the proposed overhaul of the felony sentencing structure — found in Senate Bill 220 sponsored by Senate President John Alario — that the sheriffs have brought to him. He is also thinking about tweaking the proposed limits to the habitual offender law that would benefit non-violent offenders — included in Senate Bill 221 also by Alario — for the sheriffs.

"Where it makes sense to make adjustments, we are certainly going to do that," Edwards said about his conversation with the sheriffs association.

"I suspect the overwhelming majority of the package is going to pass the Legislature, be signed into law," Edwards said Thursday.

- Record: MERLIN_26940117
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