

2020 ISSUE PAPER: CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Position Statement

The League of Women Voters of the United States believes that we must ensure that our courts are “fair, efficient, and accessible” to all. This includes equity in sentencing standards. And, action “to obtain alternatives to incarceration is of prime importance.”

2019 Legislative Recap: In 2019, the legislature passed legislation instituting criminal justice reforms for those both in and out of custody. People subject to forensic commitments will now have access to timely competency evaluations as required by the *Trueblood* settlement. Formerly-incarcerated individuals will have earlier and easier access to the vote and an easier time cleaning up their criminal record to improve employment, housing, and education prospects. And the legislature codified a modified version of the law enforcement reforms mandated by the De-Escalate Washington initiative, I-940.

Summary of Issues for the 2020 Legislative Session

Reform is needed at every stage of the criminal justice process, from the cash bail system that disproportionately locks up poor people, to a system of mass incarceration that is expensive, unjust, and ineffective, to the difficulties encountered by people who have been imprisoned once they return to society. While the Washington Legislature passed several bills in 2019 addressing criminal justice reform, there is still much work to be done.

- Inequities in the criminal justice system are apparent in even the earliest stages of proceedings—pretrial detention. Those who can afford bail are released; those who can’t must remain in jail, even though they have not been convicted of any crime. Ninety-five percent of the growth in the overall jail inmate population in the U.S. since 2000 was due to the increase in the number of people in jail awaiting trial. Poor people, people of color, and people with certain disabilities are disproportionately affected—leading to loss of income, possible loss of employment and housing, disruption of prescribed medications, and stresses on one’s family—all indicators of debtors’ prisons. Advocating for cash bail reform in Washington will increase fairness, integrity, and effectiveness of the criminal justice system.
- Alternatives to mass incarceration. The jail and prison population in the United States increased from less than 200,000 in 1972 to more than 2 million by the end of 2017. Although the prison population has declined from its peak in 2009, this can largely be attributed to reforms in half a dozen states that reduced prison populations in those states by at least 30%. We will be working to ensure that Washington joins these states in recognizing the damage caused to imprisoned individuals and our society as a whole by our current system of mass incarceration.
- Abolition of the death penalty. Although the Washington State Supreme Court has ruled that capital punishment is unconstitutional as applied, we need to make the repeal permanent by removing capital punishment as a sentencing option for aggravated murder.
- Protect the right to vote for those with felony convictions by making the restoration of this right automatic following release from prison, even for individuals who are still on community custody (parole). The right to vote is a cornerstone of our democracy, and we need to ensure that this right is one that is guaranteed to all.

Issue Chair: Deb Carstens, 206-295-9529, dcarstens@lwvwa.org