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EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

District attorney says criminals being released from prison too soon

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File, Star-Tribune

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Michael Blonigen was sworn in for his most recent term on Jan. 5, 2015, at the Townsend Justice Center in Casper.

THERMOPOLIS -- Natrona County District Attorney Mike Blonigen accused the Wyoming Department of Corrections and the state Board of Parole on Thursday of releasing convicts from prison too soon.

Blonigen described to lawmakers on the Joint Judiciary Committee, which was meeting in Thermopolis, cases from the Casper area in which people were released from prison years earlier than their sentences mandated. Some, he said, served just over half their sentences, he said.

"We're really not telling the public what we're really doing when we tell the public someone's going to prison for 10-15 years," he said. "Did we really mean five or less? Is that something that's fundamentally dishonest?"

Officials from the Corrections Department and Parole Board countered many of the DA's claims with their own data.

Blonigen spoke about problems with the two Wyoming agencies as part of a discussion with the Joint Judiciary Committee about why he disagreed with a bill it sponsored in the 2017 session. The criminal justice reform measure, which ultimately died, swapped lengthy prison sentences for drug treatment and community rehabilitation for nonviolent felons. Blonigen's opposition to the bill was instrumental in its defeat in Cheyenne.

Lawmakers listened to Blonigen's testimony but took no action on the matter at this point.

The prosecutor told lawmakers more money was needed to bolster drug courts and drug test people on parole. He said it would be a good idea for parole officers to write reports to send to the courts about every parolee under their supervision.

Lawmakers asked Board of Parole Director Dan Fetsco about the cases that Blonigen brought up. Fetsco said he'd be happy to review the files, but he didn't have access to them Thursday. It struck him as odd that people with criminal histories as described by Blonigen were being let out so early on good behavior, he said.

The board takes parole seriously, he said.

Parole officers do not have the time to write the types of reports requested by Blonigen on everyone they supervise, said Steve Lindly, Wyoming Department of Corrections deputy director. As with most workers, their job responsibilities have greatly increased over the past decade, he said.

"We're trying to improve that communication (with Blonigen) to meet his expectations," he said. "Ultimately we're supervising for the court or the Board of Parole."

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