

# An open letter to Governor-Elect Pillen and our newly elected state senators.

You are inheriting a crisis.

Our prisons are in a statutory overcrowding emergency.<sup>1</sup> Prison spending is surging, so much so that Nebraska's growth in our corrections budget is among the highest in the nation.<sup>2</sup> Recidivism is trending in the wrong direction.<sup>3</sup> Our prison racial disparities are among the worst in the nation.<sup>4</sup> None of this makes our communities safer.

An inability to address this crisis brought us to this point, but our past does not have to define the future. You can choose a better path for Nebraska — a smart justice approach that invests in solutions, not more prisons.

While Nebraskans have our differences, the vast majority of us believe officials can be doing so much more on prison reform. In fact, polling has shown that most Nebraskans support efforts to reduce the number of people in prison and nearly all Nebraskans support diverting people with mental illnesses, including addiction, to treatment centers instead of jails and prisons when they commit nonviolent crimes.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, Nebraskans know what works.

And Nebraskans know that we cannot build our way out of the problem by shoveling millions of taxpayer dollars into more concrete. The answer is reform.

You already have plenty of blueprints to choose from, including other states' success stories, the Criminal Justice Reinvestment effort, and recommendations in our own Statehouse-to-Prison Pipeline report.

Inaction is unthinkable. At risk is another thousand people in our overcrowded prison system<sup>6</sup> and estimates of a billion dollars or more in new prison construction alone.<sup>7</sup> We urge you to work with other stakeholders to finally pass meaningful prison reform that meets the urgency of this moment.

2023 is the year to get it done, a year for smart justice.



<sup>1</sup>WJAG Norfolk, *Nebraska's prison overcrowding emergency now in third year.* (July 18, 2022)

<sup>2</sup>Omaha World-Herald, *Paying the price: Nebraska gun law helped spark nation-leading prison growth.* (Jan. 9, 2022)

<sup>3</sup>Nebraska Criminal Justice Reinvestment Working Group Final Report. (Jan. 14, 2022)

<sup>4</sup>3 News Now, *Black Nebraskans incarcerated at disproportionately high rates compared to white Nebraskans, study shows.* (Feb. 28, 2022)

<sup>5</sup>ACLU of Nebraska, *Poll shows pushback on new prison plan.* (Sept. 17, 2020)

<sup>6</sup>Nebraska Examiner, *Criminal justice reform bill goes down in flames after lengthy debate.* (April 6, 2022)

<sup>7</sup>Nebraska Examiner, *\$270 million prison proposal runs into tough questions and calls for alternatives.* (Feb. 3, 2022)