

Coghill-backed crime reform bill advances

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JUNEAU — There's a saying that making and passing a bill is a lot like making sausage. Most of it happens behind doors, in what can only be assumed to be a stomach-churning activity that would kill your appetite.

Bills often appear for one or two hearings, disappear into offices and re-emerge later with a new version ready to pass, sometimes with little explanation of changes.

But that's not what happened for the bipartisan omnibus crime and sentencing reform bill, which advanced out of the Senate Judiciary Committee this week.

Senate Bill 64, which is backed primarily by North Pole Sen. John Coghill, got seven lengthy hearings since lawmakers gaveled in, in January, each seeming much more like a workshop. Representatives from the public defender's office, the department of Law and Corrections spent that time going line by line, evaluating the sweeping reform bill's many programs.

When asked about the treatment of the bill, Coghill, who chairs the Judiciary Committee, said that it was by design.

"It's a methodology that I use, and maybe in Judiciary, it's needed when you're dealing with criminal codes," he said. "They (prosecutors and defense attorneys) litigate on each word, where in many other bills there's a sense of law and tell them what to do, but it's not highly litigated."

That process, he said, paid off with the broad spectrum of politics represented in the names attached to the bill. There's fellow Republican Sen. Fred Dyson but also Democrats Sen. Hollis French and Johnny Ellis, both of Anchorage, who support the bill.

The other unusual endorsements of the bill came from representatives of public defenders and the Department of Law.

The bill includes a 24/7 sobriety program, a criminal justice commission, an expanded probation program for parolees at high-risk of drug abuse, a recidivism reduction fund, raising the felony theft threshold credit for time served in treatment facilities and an expanded risk-assessment program for inmates.

What was left on the chopping block was a program that would have created a limited driver's license for people who lost a license because of a DUI and agreed to exhaustive alcohol monitoring.

The bill came about as the state wrestles with its declining budget and seemingly unending increases for corrections, linked to the state's highest-in-the-nation recidivism rate. Coghill said the aim is that the programs will help keep criminals from committing new crimes and stay out of costly prison cells.

The bill now heads to the Senate Finance Committee, which is the last major stop before a floor vote in the Senate, after which it will head to the House.

Coghill said he's preparing for major work to get it passed into law by the time lawmakers gavel out in April.

"I am committed to get it through," he said. "I've been doing homework, and I've been trying to show them the benefit. That's why you saw me working so deliberately."

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