

Budget Statement Regarding Judicial Commission and Parole Commission

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin strongly believes in citizen input and government oversight, which protect the public from the political swings in government. We are particularly concerned about proposed changes in AB 64/SB 30 to two state Commissions involving citizen oversight.

The Wisconsin Judicial Commission was created in 1971 as an independent body to oversee judicial conduct with authority to investigate judges, including state Supreme Court Justices, and recommend discipline. As proposed in this budget, the Judicial Commission would be placed under the control of the state Supreme Court. Removing this independence from the commission would erode public confidence in the courts by the appearance of impropriety and create conflicts of interest for the commission and the court. These concerns are not just our own but were expressed by all nine members of the Judicial Committee as well as in testimony to your committee by Wisconsin Supreme Court Chief Justice Patience Roggensack. We join with them in urging removal of this proposal.

Our other concern regarding removal of citizen oversight is the Parole Commission. This Commission was appointed in 1989 and was given authority for granting discretionary paroles. Following passage of Truth In Sentencing in the year 2000, that oversight has been limited to prisoners whose crimes were committed prior to that date. There are almost 3,000 of these prisoners and many may be parole-eligible. While no inmate is "entitled" to parole, prisoners do have a legal right to fair review of their status. It has been 17 years since the passage of Truth In Sentencing, and if even a third of those eligible were able to be paroled the cost saving would be very substantial.

In the past few years, the number of paroles has been decreasing steadily and appointments to the Commission have gone unfilled. This budget proposes the elimination of the Parole Commission with the authority vested in one person appointed from the Department of Corrections. We are concerned with limiting the review of parole to only one person and having that person part of the system which imprisons them. We believe the removal of citizen oversight is not beneficial to either the prisoners or the Department of Corrections.

We urge you to reject the proposed measures to place the Judicial Commission under the control of the Wisconsin Supreme Court and eliminate the Parole Commission.