

Drug Policy Alliance and Somos Un Pueblo Unido
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Two Bills Introduced to Improve New Mexico's Criminal Justice System

A Broad Range of Community Groups Come Together to Support a Ban on Bias-Based Profiling. Treatment Instead of Incarceration Proposal will Save Lives and Money.

Santa Fe, NM - Two bills were introduced into the House of Representatives yesterday that will improve New Mexico's criminal justice system. A wide range of community partners have come together to advocate for both pieces of legislation - a ban on bias-based policing (House Bill 428) and a bill proposing treatment instead of incarceration for drug possession offenders (House Bill 441).

Rep. Nathan Cote (D-Las Cruces) is championing a proposal to improve the criminal justice system by officially banning bias-based policing, or racial profiling, in New Mexico.

"This bill is part of a bipartisan and multicultural effort to protect our families and to foster a better relationship between our communities and law enforcement," said Cote.

Cote is joined by over a dozen local and state community organizations to advocate for a ban of bias-based profiling in New Mexico. Organizations supporting the initiative include the New Mexico and Santa Fe branch of the NAACP, Somos Un Pueblo Unido, the Conference of Churches, and Drug Policy Alliance New Mexico.

"We have documented many reports from around the state of individuals being unjustly profiled by police officers because of their perceived nationality or because of the language they speak," said Marcela Diaz, director of Somos Un Pueblo Unido, a statewide immigrants' rights organization. "This type of profiling and discrimination harms our communities and does not represent our nation's ideals of equality and fairness."

"This legislation is more than just protecting an individual's race or ethnicity," said Holly Beaumont, legislative advocate for the New Mexico Conference of Churches. "The bias-based profiling ban includes targeting individuals based on gender, sexual orientation, and also religion. The bill is inclusive to protect all of God's people."

Rep. Antonio Maestas (D-Albuquerque) introduced a second criminal justice bill, the Substance Abuse and Crime Prevention Act, which proposes appropriate community-based treatment in lieu of incarceration for people with drug possession arrests, or for people with drug-related probation or parole violations.

"In 2007, New Mexico wasted 22 million dollars to incarcerate people with nonviolent drug possession offenses," said Reena Szczepanski, director of Drug Policy Alliance New Mexico. "In a time of economic hardship, we urge legislators to support this bill to save New Mexico millions of dollars a year, and help people with drug addictions get the treatment they need to rebuild their lives."

"The so-called war on drugs has had tremendous negative and unintended consequences. What this country needs is a 'Marshall Plan' to confront drug abuse," Maestas said. "The disincentive that the criminal justice system puts on drug use pales in comparison to the addictive qualities of these chemical narcotics. We need cost-efficient and more effective policies to make our communities safer and to rid our families of drug abuse."

Both bills are scheduled in the House Consumer and Public Affairs Committee.