

# RALLYING FOR REFORM

BY LORELEI LAIRD

## FEDERAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM MAY BE LANGUISHING, BUT IT'S BECOMING A REALITY FOR STATES WITH BIPARTISAN SUPPORT

**W**hen Lisa Graybill organized a rally for criminal justice reform at the Louisiana Capitol in April, she was expecting maybe 300 people. Twice that many showed up.

"I haven't seen anything like that, and I've been doing civil rights advocacy for almost 20 years now," says Graybill, who helped organize the day as part of a coalition called Louisianans for Prison Alternatives, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. "We ran out of T-shirts. ... We weren't entirely prepared for the volume or the energy."

A lot of that support, Graybill believes, came from people who have personal experience with Louisiana's prison policies. As of 2015, Louisiana—a state that went to the Republicans in the last five presidential elections—had the dubious distinction of incarcerating more people than not only any other state (according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics) but also any nation (according to the UK's Institute

for Criminal Policy Research). More than other Americans, Louisianans are personally affected by imprisonment, or they know someone who is.

"The upside, if you can call it that, to being the world's leading incarceration state is that you've got a whole lot of pissed-off people," says Will Harrell, former Southern regional director of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Campaign for Smart Justice. "It's hard to find someone in Louisiana not either directly or closely indirectly impacted by the carceral policies of that state."

Putting that many people in prison is also expensive. In 2015, Louisiana had a \$1.6 billion budget gap—so much that the state government wasn't sure it could afford its 2016 presidential primary election. The same year, the corrections budget was \$622 million, nearly \$200M more than similarly populated Alabama and South Carolina. And all that spending wasn't lowering crime; FBI statistics

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