Edwards signs criminal justice overhaul into law

By Rebekah Allen
rallen@theadvocate.com

With many supporters calling it an “historic achievement” for Louisiana, Gov. John Bel Edwards signed 10 bills into law overhauling the state’s criminal justice system, with an eye on shedding the state’s undesired title of the world’s incarceration capital.

Edwards signed the bills before a packed house of more than 100 gleeful supporters and a bipartisan slate of lawmakers who authored many of the bills. Advocates of the effort applauded both the scope of the overhaul that was signed into law, as well as the cooperation between Republicans and Democrats that it took to enact the changes.

“I’ve been around and near the halls of this Capitol for 20 years now ... I am sure I have seen more impactful legislation passed,” said Flossell Daniels, a criminal justice reform advocate who participated on the task force to develop the recommendations. “We have made a way for us to impact thousands of people’s lives.”

Edwards thanked the Legislature for coming together to pass the package and, in particular, the sponsors of the bills. He acknowledged that it was a politically risky move to champion changes that some could frame as being soft on crime.

And he noted that when he made shrinking the prison population a campaign promise, even his own advisers questioned whether it was wise to continue to tout the commitment.

“I’m signing these bills because a broken system justice system leads to more crime not less,” Edwards said. “Today, we begin building the system we want rather than continue to settle for the system we have.”

In total, the legislation is projected to reduce the state’s prison population by 10 percent over the next decade. The savings the state will generate for no longer housing those inmates is projected to be $262 million, of which 70 percent has been obligated for programs to rehabilitate offenders and support victims.

The new laws will reduce mandatory minimums, trim sentences and give some inmates access to parole eligibility sooner. It creates a medical furlough program, which allows the sickest inmates to temporarily receive treatment off-site, and be eligible for Medicaid, which saves the state on medical costs.

The package overhauls drug sentencing, allowing lighter sentences based on weights and streamlines the state’s many incongruous theft penalties. One bill in the package will limit how often juvenile offenders can receive life without parole sentences.

The measure also expands prison alternatives, like drug court, and expands safety nets for people getting out of jail and returning to their communities, by reducing their financial burdens and helping them have better access to jobs. Another bill will help improve the way victims are notified when offenders have parole hearings or are released.

“I’m not proud of our title as the most incarcerated state, but that is now going to be a part of our history,” Edwards said. Here’s a breakdown of the 10 criminal justice bills in the package:

- Senate Bill 139 by Sen. Danny Martin, R-Metarie: Expands probation eligibility to offenders, expands eligibility for substance abuse probation and drug courts, creates a medical furlough policy allowing temporary release of inmates programming to inmates. In the second year, the Office of Juvenile Justice will start to receive 20 percent of the pie.
- House Bill 116 by Rep. Stephen Dwight, R-Lake Charles: Improves victim notification system to allow people to receive notification about an offender’s release or parole hearings.
- House Bill 139 by Rep. Julie Emerson, R-Carencro: Expands opportunities so people with criminal convictions can apply for and receive occupational licenses.
- House Bill 680 by Rep. Joe Marino, no-party-Gretna: Suspends child support payments for people who have been incarcerated for more than six months, unless they have a means to pay.