Prison reform bills pass

Package aimed at reducing inmate population

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All 10 bills of a dramatic overhaul of Louisiana's criminal justice system have passed both chambers of the Legislature and are within reach of the governor's desk for final approval.

It's a victory for advocates pursuing the ambitious revamp, which will, in large part, lead to some lighter jail sentences. It's also somewhat unexpected for the bipartisan consensus on the issue in such a deeply conservative state where law enforcement and elected officials have long prided themselves for being tough on crime.

But being tough on crime has led to laws that have, over time, lengthened sentences and removed parole opportunities for offenders, earning Louisiana the unwanted distinction of being the most highly incarcerated place in the world.

Some of the measures still await approval of amendments tacked on through the process, but legislators and Gov. John Bel Edwards celebrated Monday evening after the final group of bills passed the House chamber.

"Today's progress on the criminal justice reform package coming out of both chambers demonstrates that we can find bipartisanship and collaboration among our elected leaders in Louisiana on tough initiatives that prioritize the best interests of our people," Edwards said in a statement. "I am proud of the Legislature's work on these historic bills and look forward to signing them into law when they make it to my desk."

When running for office, Edwards promised to reduce the prison population. He endorsed

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The state's prolonged budget agreement on little this session in the Legislature, who could present the final legislation this is

ner Magee, R-Houma, as he

other bill

offenders have parole hearings

opportunities by reducing their financial burdens and helping them

prison alternatives, like drug court, and expands safety nets without parole sentences.

nile offenders can receive life

age will limit how often juvenile offenders can receive life

programmes to rehabilitate of-

100,000 people, which is twice the national average.

But in an interview, Martiny said he was disappointed in the characterization by Bacala. He said the bills overwhelmingly impact nonviolent criminals.

He also questioned whether Louisiana's current policies breed more dangerous criminals by putting nonviolent offenders in jail for so long without opportunities to rehabilitate them.

Martiny, who handled the more controversial bills on the Senate side, said this package has been the most important thing he’s done in his 23 years in the Legislature. He said the package is both fiscally responsible and good policy.

“It’s always easy to create a crime, to enhance penalties, to take away good time; no one ever criticizes you for that,” Martiny said. “But we overin-

carcerate nonviolent people. As a result, we don’t have the funds to deal with these people when they’re in jail, and they come out more dangerous than when they came in.”

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