

Transcript of Prison Podcast Part 1
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CHRISTIE MARTIN: In November 2009, Dr. Scott Thornsley wrote an opinion piece addressing Pennsylvania's overcrowded prison system and ways to solve that growing problem. Thornsley is chairman of the Criminal Justice Administration Department at Mansfield University. He is also the former Legislative Director for the Department of Corrections. Mansfield University Public Relations Director, Dennis Miller, talked with Dr. Thornsley about the overcrowding problem and various solutions.

DENNIS MILLER: Welcome Scott Thornsley. I appreciate you coming today.

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: My pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

DENNIS MILLER: You did an op-ed piece that appeared in the Harrisburg Patriot a couple of weeks ago, on the overcrowding of prisons problem. It was really pretty hard-hitting. You offered some solutions. First, let's go through a little bit of your background. Your chairman of the Criminal Justice Administration Department here at Mansfield University. You've been here how long?

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: This is my tenth year here.

DENNIS MILLER: Criminal Justice is, I think, the largest department on campus, isn't it?

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: It's the second or third largest, in back of the education department.

DENNIS MILLER: With 265--

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: 265 majors and about 20 minors. So we are a big department.

DENNIS MILLER: And you're really, really busy.

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: I have been extremely busy. Right now we're just beginning to conduct a search for a third fulltime tenure-track position position, which will replace Mark LeBerge, who left in August. We are conducting a search for a regular part-time instructor, which is going to replace the honorable John Leet, who is a president judge. He is retiring at the end of December and he is not allowed to continue with any form of state employment. So we're really sorry to see him go.

DENNIS MILLER: Before you came here, you have some background with the corrections system.

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: Yes. From 1976 until 1995 I was employed by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, the last 13 years of which I was their Director of the Office of Legislative Affairs, which means I was their legislative liaison, which means I was the Governor's lobbyist on behalf of the Governor's office and the Department of Corrections to the Pennsylvania General Assembly. So I knew the General Assembly and its workings and how it works and why it works well.

DENNIS MILLER: That puts you in a pretty unique position.

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: It was a wonderful opportunity and it really has aided my teaching in the classroom. I don't have cop stories, I have public policy stories. They're not as fun, but for the interested student they should be more interesting because it will tell students how public policy is actually developed. Next fall I'm going to offer a course for the first time entitled "Criminal Justice Public Policy Development."

DENNIS MILLER: What you wrote in the op-ed piece was about the overcrowding of prisons in

Pennsylvania. We're going to highlight just Pennsylvania, but it's not a problem just for Pennsylvania. It's other states also, I think.

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: In 30 other states. There was an article in today's New York Times that talks about the surge in the prison population nationwide. Twenty states saw a decline and of course, unfortunately, Pennsylvania showed the highest increase. That's an embarrassment.

DENNIS MILLER: What's the cause of the rise?

DR. SCOTT THORNSLEY: The cause is there are several reasons. One of the biggest reasons is the fact that the Pennsylvania General Assembly continues to introduce and pass and sees bills signed into law which call for increasingly longer and longer prison sentences. It's a knee-jerk reaction to the crime of the week. The second reason is that the Pennsylvania parole board is getting very conservative, with respect to their approvals of parolees. Earlier this week we saw yet a third person on state parole shoot and kill a police officer in Pennsylvania. That's three too many. The first two were, of course, from Philadelphia, within the last 12 months, which prompted a total shutdown of parole.