



November 21, 2009

## Guest column: Congress should debate drug policy

*CHARLES GRASSLEY is a Republican who represents Iowa in the U.S. Senate. Contact: <http://grassley.senate.gov/contact>*

The Nov. 14 guest essay, "Let's Have a Rational Debate on Drug Policy, Senator Grassley," only addresses one piece of a complicated issue. I'd like to provide the full story.

The Senate Judiciary Committee, of which I'm a member, is debating a bill introduced by Sen. Jim Webb that would establish a National Criminal Justice Commission to review federal and state criminal justice systems. The stated goal of the legislation is for the commission to "not simply talk about the problems" in the criminal justice system but to look at all the elements of the system and find solutions to the rising prison population. The goals of the legislation are admirable and I've been working with Webb to make the bill better. However, I disagree with several parts of the legislation.

First and foremost, Congress ought to tackle issues whenever possible before bucking them to commissions. Increasingly, Congress is using commissions to avoid doing what Americans elect members to do: ask tough questions, identify possible answers, debate policy solutions and take a stand. This commission also would cost \$14 million. It's hard to justify that expenditure in the current fiscal situation, especially when it's work that Congress should be doing itself.

I'm also concerned this commission is skewed to look at only one part of the picture. We spend billions of taxpayer dollars every year on law enforcement and prisons, but we also spend billions of dollars on grants for all sorts of criminal justice programs, drug prevention, drug treatment, prisons, rehabilitation and reentry programs. These programs often overlap between two, three or even four federal bureaucracies. Year after year, grant spending is listed as a top area for fraud and abuse of taxpayer dollars by the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office. The Inspector General for the Justice Department just released an updated version of its list of high-risk programs, and grant management was on the list yet again.

Despite the significant expenditures on grants and the high risk to taxpayer dollars that has been identified, the initial draft of the commission has no requirement that grant spending dealing with drug policy be examined. This is why I filed amendments to the Webb proposal to analyze grants and recommend where savings can be found through consolidation and streamlining. If we really want to reform the criminal justice system across the country, federal spending on these issues must be addressed as part of that conversation.

Finally, I put forward an amendment to address the issue of decriminalization and legalization of any controlled substance. I filed this amendment in an effort to start a debate on this important issue. The members of the Judiciary Committee need to discuss the policy in the open. I continue to believe that decriminalization and legalization of dangerous drugs is not the right course. I've spoken to hundreds of Iowans who have had their families devastated by drugs. To simply allow this commission to be passed by the committee without addressing decriminalization or legalization will do nothing to tackle the issue and raise the stories of families impacted by drugs or the crime that occurs because of drug use. We need to make sure that whatever Congress decides, children and young people know that drugs are dangerous and that drug use is a serious issue.

Asking the tough questions may not always be popular, but it's the right thing to do. These questions need to be asked publicly in the halls of Congress, and not behind closed doors. I will continue to address the issues as Congress is elected to do, work to safeguard taxpayer dollars, and make sure the public's business is public.