

Handgun bill is easy answer to tough problem—Chambers

By D.L. Horton

The vice chairman of the Nebraska Legislature's Judiciary Committee said he will not support a proposed bill to provide mandatory sentences for people convicted of possessing a deadly weapon in the commission of a crime.

Sen. Ernest Chambers of Omaha called the bill one of the "charades" lawmakers use to make citizens think the Legislature is doing something about crime.

The bill, to be introduced by Sen. Rex Haberman of Imperial, would provide mandatory sentences for anyone possessing a deadly weapon during the commission of a crime, regardless of whether it was used or even shown. It would also forbid plea bargaining or any reduction of the sentence, including parole and probation.

Haberman said this would make people "think twice" before using a deadly weapon. He said the bill would provide more of a deterrent than a waiting period to buy or register handguns.

The senators engaged in a verbal sparring match during the sparsely attended hearing. Chambers said Haberman was looking for an easy solution to a complex problem.

Chambers said the bill could conflict with existing laws and could be unconstitutional. He said the bill would force county attorneys to file a charge they may not feel applies.

Chambers said mere possession under the bill becomes as bad as if the person had used the weapon. He used the example of someone shoplifting with a knife in their purse. They would be guilty of a misdemeanor but could be sent to prison under the bill.

Chambers also said the bill could get the state in trouble with the federal court system by overcrowding prisons. He noted several states have been ordered to release prisoners because of overcrowding. He asked Haberman if he was ready for that.

"Five in a three-man cell is fine with me, and eight in a two-man cell is fine with me," Haberman said. "I would support legislation to build more prisons and to fill them."

He said citizens would also support this if the proper commodities were taxed to pay for prisons. He suggested taxing liquor and cigarettes.

Ernie Fellows of Grand Island testified in favor of the bill. He said he was a "concerned citizen" who felt crime on the street was bad enough to call for this type of legislation. Fellow said, "I'm willing to pay for it."

The bill would provide a mandatory two-year sentence for the first offense, a minimum five-year sentence for the second offense and 30 years for subsequent offenses and the chance of a habitual criminal conviction that could mean life imprisonment.

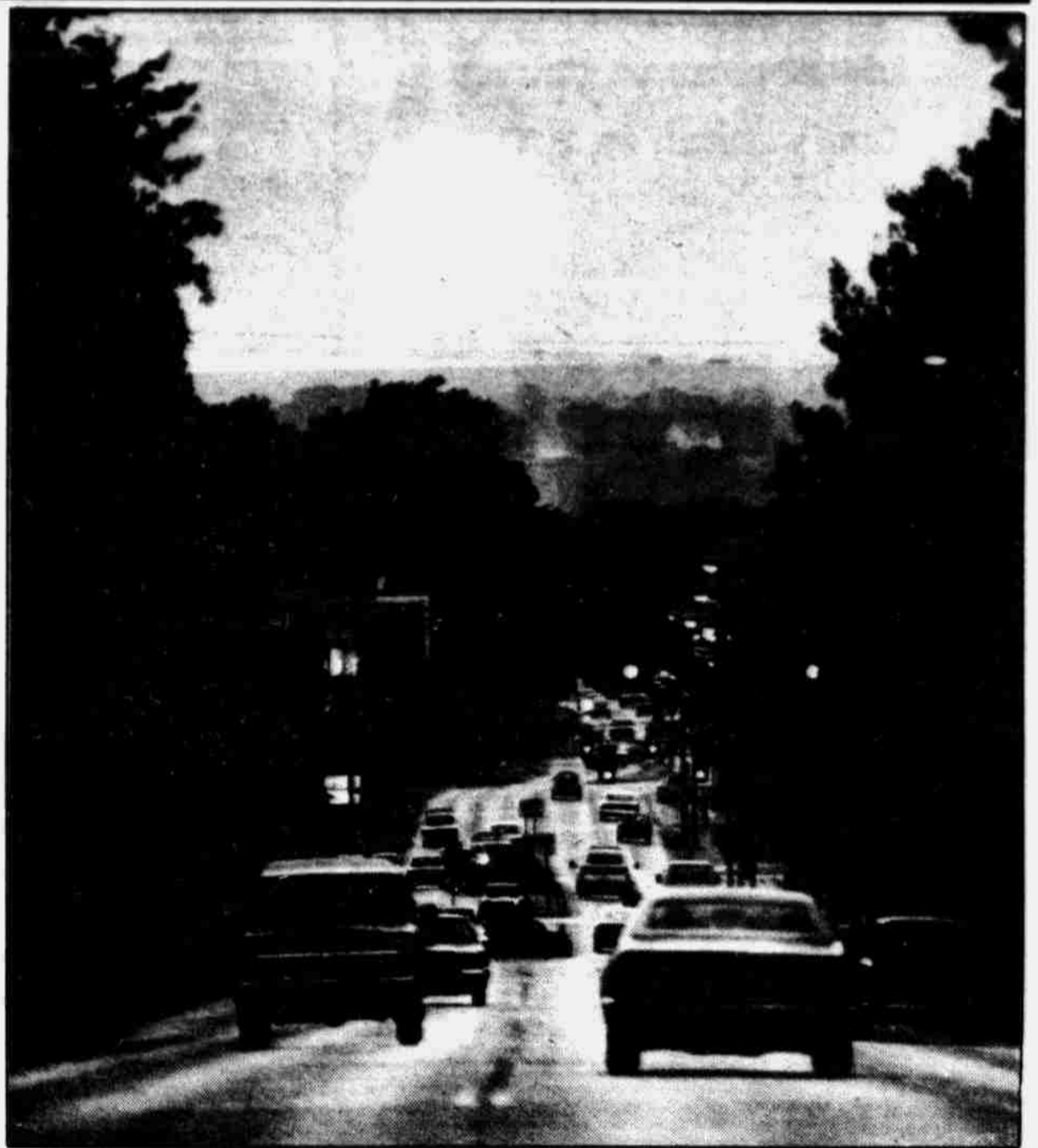


Photo by Jerry McBride

As traffic rides off into the sunset, a telephoto lens compresses several blocks of South Street.

Solutions sought for nationwide prison problem

By Joe Kreizinger

Building new prisons and expanding existing facilities is a national trend which may be short-sighted and could make the crime control situation worse, said Chris Eskridge, assistant professor of criminal justice.

Eskridge said the Attorney General's Task Force on Violent Crime, co-chaired by former U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell and Governor James Thompson of Illinois, recently released their findings regarding the crime situation.

Eskridge said the task force decided the building of new prisons and the conversion of military bases to prison facilities would best serve the nation's needs.

Eskridge said he disagrees with this finding.

"Agreed, prison is the best place for some," Eskridge said, "but there is a certain paradox existing that people are not aware of: that is that prison often aggravates the problem."

"A person who has been in prison is often quicker to commit a new offense when released."

Eskridge said the national average cost to keep one individual institutionalized for one year is between \$12,000 and \$14,000. With the building and renovation of facilities, this could increase the estimates to \$20,000 per year.

"Twenty thousand dollars is a huge amount of money to incarcerate someone," Eskridge said, "especially when that person may come out worse."

Crime control

Eskridge said increasing prison sizes and numbers are popular because the nation is in the "crime-control" sector of what is known as the crime model.

He explained there are two basic sides to the crime model — the concepts of crime control and of due process.

Due process peaked in the 1960s with the relaxation of drug laws and massive movements for the rights of the individual, Eskridge said.

He said the crime model fluctuates from crime control to due process, but added the trend is shifting steadily to crime control, which depends on stricter law enforcement and harsher sentences.

Eskridge said community-based programs such as halfway houses may offer some solutions to the problem.

Other possible solutions Eskridge suggested included an increased use of restitution, fine schedules, probation and using more volunteers for rehabilitation purposes.

"These alone certainly will not solve the problem,"

Eskridge said. "But they would be a-much more humane and certainly more economical plan."

Pre-trial release

Eskridge said that one aspect which must be taken into consideration is that of pre-trial release. He said the majority of people who are imprisoned before trial need not be.

Eskridge said many inmates are being detained prior to trial for minor violations, such as traffic tickets.

"This accounts for large expenses," Eskridge said. "It

also often exposes a young person to situations he would otherwise not have been exposed to."

Eskridge said there is hope in the future that the nation will adopt a more "progressive" outlook on crime.

"The days of the '60s are gone," Eskridge said. "It will become more economically feasible to cut down on prison numbers. We no longer will be able to spend millions of dollars on new correctional institutions. Then we will be forced to look for alternatives."

Clinic to counsel Vietnam vets

By Patty Pryor

An outreach clinic designed to provide counseling services and peer support for Vietnam veterans is scheduled to open in about two months, said Guy Lossing, administrative assistant to the chief of staff at the Veterans Administration Medical Center.

The clinic, however, will be separate from the medical center and the VA office, he said.

"It will be located at 1240 N. 10th St., in a sort of duplex structure which is zoned for business," Lossing said. "We'll occupy about two-thirds of the building, and another business uses the other part periodically."

Isolation from the VA regional office is essential in reaching those veterans who otherwise would not benefit from counseling services, he said.

"A lot of Vietnam vets really don't like to deal with the bureaucratic system," Lossing said, "and let's face it, the regional offices are part of this system."

"The clinic is designed to be placed in the community, remote from the hospital and the regional office itself so they don't have to deal with the system."

"The whole concept is to reach into the community and help vets who would not normally come into the bureaucratic system, because they feel that the bureaucracy is not responsible to their specific needs."

The counseling, which will include individual sessions as well as group interaction, is guided by two basic priorities, Lossing said.

The first is a need to treat more serious psychological and readjustment problems involved with delayed stress syndrome, he said.

The second priority is to help veterans overcome obstacles in locating employment. This will be done in conjunction with Nebraska Job Service.

"As the clinic grows, we'll identify employers and establish personal contacts," he said. "We'll build up a network over a period of time."

The clinic will be staffed by two full-time counselors

and a receptionist/counselor, Lossing said.

Both counselors are Vietnam veterans and have worked at a similar storefront clinic in Omaha.

Lincoln was chosen as a site for a new clinic partly because of overflow at the Omaha facility, he said.

At times, there have been as many as 100 Vietnam veterans coming to Omaha from Lincoln for treatment, he added.

The opening of a Lincoln clinic is the direct result of Congressional hearings which determined a great demand for counseling designed specifically for Vietnam-era veterans, Lossing said.

The center will not open until word is received from the VA central office in Washington, D.C., which coordinates the opening so it will mesh with plans at the national level, he added.

The clinic is one of 42 counseling facilities to open nationwide, for which Congress has authorized \$29.6 million. This will bring the total number of centers in the country to 133.

"I think that the program's philosophy is very good," Lossing said. "It meets the needs of a significant number of the vet population, and if this is what is needed to provide the necessary counseling, I'm all for it."

inside monday

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