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The struggle to end the lock 'em up and throw away the key policies that resulted in the U.S. jailing more of its citizens than any other industrialized country has just won a significant victory.

For more than 35 years, families in New York have been plagued by the notorious Rockefeller Drug Laws. The policy which included long mandatory prison sentences for first time non violent drug offenders resulted in major drug lords often going free while the non violent first offenders were given harsh sentences. The rule was particularly harsh for African Americans and women.

In New York by 1990, 61.2 percent of all female prisoners were committed for a drug offense, compared to 32.2 percent of men. Mothers, who needed drug treatment, were thrown in jail for sentences as long as 20 years, torn from their families leaving children to fend for themselves in the foster care system.

African Americans and Latinos constituted 94.2 percent of the total population of drug felons in New York, whites were 5.3 percent. After decades of protest by civil rights and civil liberties groups and impacted communities, the law has ended with its repeal by New York State officials.

It's expected to save New York over a quarter billion dollars a year, but more importantly it will usher in an era of smarter crime polices. The new approach will send most non violent drug offenders to drug courts where they have access to treatment and implement a new law creating a drug "kingpin" offense for "organized drug traffickers who profit from and prey on drug users" and new crimes for adults who sell drugs to children. It rights the backward impact of the previous law, that seemed to target the victims with prison and let the "bad guys" go free.

Now instead of unemployed teenagers, or girlfriends coerced by their boyfriends into carrying a package of drugs, the major drug dealers will get the prison sentences and the drug addicts will get the treatment.

New York Governor David Paterson should be applauded for his unwavering and longtime support for ending these cruel drug laws.

Immediately prior to the repeal, he cited the example of a female drug addict who was arrested 60 times over 25 years. After being successfully treated for her addiction, she became a drug counselor. It shows the wisdom of the new policy.

There is a perfect storm for change – a confluence of state fiscal crises and the steady drumbeat of voices for prison reform. States like California, with dangerously overcrowded prisons, are adopting smarter sentencing policies similar to New York.

Some states are letting prisoners go early in order to save money. We are at a rare moment when voices advocating an end to mass incarceration; urging alternative sentencing and ending the practice of using prisons to lock up the mentally ill and the addicted are resonating.

This moment reflects an important window in our history. It is the time to dream big. The

economic and political shifts in our country open the door to advance policies that we thought would take decades to win. Overturning the draconian drug laws in New York was one of many battles predicted to take at least five more years to win, but the political shifts - reflected in the election of President Obama - and the unprecedented fiscal crises brings us a unique opportunity for change.

Like all battles before it, we have to keep moving forward until we achieve the comprehensive change our country needs. Now is the time.

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