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By JAMES W. WADE III

Staff Reporter

Ohio Governor John Kasich came to Cleveland to speak to a group of pastors, politicians and community leaders about the new sentencing reform. Kasich signed a sentencing reform bill that will allow some felons to skip prison and others to get out early.

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House Bill 86 is focused on keeping dangerous and violent offenders behind bars and rehabilitates inmates who are first time, non violent offenders. Kasich said this piece of legislation, which becomes law in 90 days, may be the most important thus far in his short tenure as governor because it goes directly toward helping people improve their lives.

The Gov. said HB 86 will ease overcrowding in Ohio's prison system. "If you're going to put your own future ahead of other people's lives and their ability to reclaim their lives," Kasich said, "then you're making a big mistake."

Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction director Gary Mohr talked about the new law, and shared the plans they have for the future of felons. Our programs are about offering "a sense of hope," said Mohr.

Under the law, judges will have the discretion to send non-violent fourth-and fifth-degree felons to community-based halfway-house facilities instead of prison. It increases the earned credit system so that inmates can more quickly shave days off of their sentences. And it allows some felons who have already served 80 percent of their time to be immediately released.

The law will require more rehabilitation services rather than prison for some. But it is not just

about helping felons. It also will help the state's wallet by lowering the prison population, currently over 50,000 in facilities designed to hold 38,000. Ohio may save $46 million by 2014, Mohr said.

Republican Kasich called the bill a bipartisan effort, hailing the leadership of state Rep. Tracy Heard, a Columbus Democrat, and state Sen. Bill Seitz, a Cincinnati Republican, to name a few.

"I don't want anyone to think we've lost discipline," Kasich said. "You do bad … We're locking you up. But for someone that wants to do better, we're giving you a chance."

Some other key provisions to the bill are:

Equalizes penalties for crack and powder cocaine. Allows inmates to qualify for an eight percent term reduction based on successful completion of educational, vocational, and mental health programming. Increases felony status for theft related crimes from $500 to $1,000. Permits the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections to petition for judicial release of inmates who have served 80 percent of their sentence, successfully completed rehabilitative programming, and have no incidents of violence while incarcerated and fully funds community corrections based on proper utilization of the Ohio Risk Assessment System to all sentencing jurisdictions.

It's estimated this will reduce Ohio’s prison population by more than 3,700 inmates by 2014 saving more than $46 million. From 50,655 inmates in 2011 to 46,891 inmates in 2014.

Additional cost savings will be realized throughout the criminal justice system as overall crime rates are reduced because first-time; non-violent offenders are deterred from a criminal lifestyle.