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## Justice reforms approved

By John Kovach

Responding to alarms sounding since two paroled criminals killed a mother and two daughters during a home invasion in Cheshire in July, the General Assembly passed sweeping criminal justice reforms on January 22.

In addition to improving communications among State agencies and creating a full-time parole board, the legislation also creates the new crime of home invasion and increases the penalty for burglary of a dwelling at night; makes those convicted of second-degree burglary or home invasion ineligible for parole until serving at least 85 percent of the sentence imposed; updates the crime victim notification law; requires GPS monitoring of 300 more parolees, and creates a diversionary program for people with psychiatric disorders who have been accused of less serious crimes. But legislators stopped short of implementing a "three strikes" law which would imprison violent offenders for life after their third such offense.

"We made some good progress on Tuesday in addressing criminal justice reform and fixing the problem in Cheshire and the Petit Family tragedy," said Democratic State Rep. William Tong of the 147th District, who represents western New Canaan.

New Canaan Republican State Rep. John Hetherington of the 125th District also praised the steps taken.

"The people have waited long enough and there was no reason to delay further," Rep. Hetherington said in a press release. "I am glad we were successful in gaining a special session and moved forward."

"I believe passage of this legislation is a step to protect Connecticut residents in their homes," Republican State Sen. Judith G. Freedman of the 26th District said in a release. "If this law had been in existence prior to the tragedy in Cheshire, it probably would not have prevented that horrific day for the Petit family, but we now have a definition of a new crime, home invasion. It is always difficult to be prepared for what the criminal mind will come up with next, but I do believe that by defining home invasion, Connecticut citizens may rest a little more comfortably. No matter what we do we cannot always anticipate what will happen, but we try."

"These changes are just the beginning of a much-needed, top-to-bottom reform of our entire criminal justice system. With this legislation we are making great strides toward improving the parole system, strengthening the laws on home invasion and burglary and cracking down on repeat offenders. More will need to be done — and we will be taking up those challenges in the regular session that begins just two weeks from now," Gov. M. Jodi Rell said in a press release.

Gov. Rell signed the bill, which passed the Senate 36-0 and the House 126-12, on January 25.

Rep. Tong was named early on to a committee reviewing the parole process, which found a lack of information sharing.

"We discovered in Cheshire the parole board did not have important documents in front of them before they let them go," Rep. Tong said. "They did not have the sentencing transcript in which the judge said the younger was a 'cold-blooded predator.' If the parole board had that, they may not have let them go."

Rep. Tong played a lead role in the effort to improve the sharing of records regarding criminal offenders, which will require a major overhaul of current operations and implementation of new technology linking departments. He wrote the portion of the bill overhauling criminal justice information and "making sure what happened in Cheshire doesn't happen again, where the parole board did not have information before setting someone free."

"This is a first step," Rep. Tong said. "People have to understand there are real consequences to changes in the law."

Rep. Hetherington and other Republicans expressed disappointment that an amendment adding a "three strikes" provision was not adopted.

"We could have added a provision that would have removed violent repeat felons for life. I am sorry we didn't take that opportunity, but we did make Connecticut safer," he said.

"The state was shaken to its core this summer by the horrific tragedy in Cheshire. Now we are taking the necessary steps to restore public confidence in the criminal justice system and ensure such tragedies do not happen in the future. The people of Connecticut deserve to be safe in their homes and they deserve to know that criminals will be punished and put away for a long, long time," Gov. Rell said.

"Violent criminals have no place in our state — except inside a prison cell," her statement continued.

Rep. Tong, however, said parole reforms will increase the population in an already-overcrowded prison system, and a "three

strikes" law would add to the burden.

"We're overcrowded by 2,000," he said. "Prisoners are sleeping in gyms with one toilet, one sink and one corrections officer. That's not a safe condition. That's a dangerous situation to put a corrections officer in. We need to recognize the scope of the problem and commit resources."

He said the prison population is expected to increase from its current level of 19,000 — already over capacity — to 21,000 or 22,000 this year.

"If we get there, we need more prison beds. We need more corrections officers, and we need re-entry programs for non-violent offenders," Rep. Tong said. "We need places to put people when they're ready for parole."

Supervision is needed for those being released, he added. Without programs that rehabilitate former prisoners, they end up back in jail.

Some convicts eligible for release are being kept behind bars for want of space in halfway houses or other programs.

"Currently there are many hundreds of people who have been released by the parole board, but because there's nowhere to go they're still in prison, and we're paying for them to live there and be supervised," he said.

An answer suggested by Rep. Tong is to invest money in initiatives such as Family Re-Entry, which he praised as a model of a program that teaches former prisoners to be productive members of society.

"I know prison is about punishing people, but there's a real component to where to put them when they get out," he said.

"It requires a very substantial investment," he later said. "It's so much more than a slogan here or a sports analogy there."

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