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A TOOL FOR BETTER JUSTICE

ADVISORY BOARD HAS MUCH POTENTIAL

LAST WEEK, Mayor Nutter promoted Louis Giorla to prison commissioner and signed an executive order to have him put together a report in 30 days on the state of Philadelphia's prisons.

Important moves, indeed. But Nutter made another announcement that day that could become one of the most significant developments in the city's law-enforcement and criminal judicial system in years.

The city will create a Criminal Justice Advisory Board. It's long overdue.

Criminal-justice-advisory boards, known as CJABs, bring major stakeholders together - the police, the district attorney, judges, the sheriff, probation and parole officer, lawyers - so they can communicate, plan and solve criminal-justice issues.

This isn't as simple as it sounds.

Egos, turf wars and budget preservation are too often a way of life in the criminal-justice community. And these often mean that needed change comes slowly in the judicial system.

The board will be a place where these agencies can work together. And it will wield a crucial carrot: Programs it creates are eligible for federal dollars funneled through the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. So ideas that the various partners may have long sought but couldn't afford, like an expanded truancy court, could become reality.

We've been overwhelmed with a barrage of bad news related to the criminal system: overcrowded jails and prisons; a lack of sentencing alternatives to time behind bars; felons unprepared to re-enter society and doomed to repeat criminal acts.

CJABs exist in more than 50 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. With the main players at the table, communication and trust between the agencies should improve. Philadelphia can learn from nearby Delaware County - that board is considered one of the best in the state.

Everett Gillison, deputy mayor for public safety, will help get Philadelphia's effort started. As the board evolves, it must be headed by a person with strong credibility and reasonable authority to keep the stakeholders engaged and committed.

And it also must have value and significance - participants must see successes along the way - better communication, more efficient buses for the Sheriff's Department or policy improvements.

A well-run board can be the start of an improved criminal-justice system for the city. *