

Drug-lifer law comes under judicial scrutiny

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Michigan's controversial 650 drug-lifer law is expected to come under scrutiny as a result of legislation to be introduced, possibly this week, in Lansing.

The precise changes in the law will be spelled out in legislation to be introduced later this week, according to State Sen. William Van Regenmorter, R-Jenison.

But the major change, the senator said, will allow judges to sentence defendants convicted of trafficking in cocaine or heroin to less than the mandatory sentences now required by law.

In 1978, the Michigan legislature enacted laws designed to combat what was seen as a growing narcotics epidemic. Someone convicted of conspiring to deliver 225 grams, for example, was subject to a mandatory minimum of 20 years in prison.

The toughest provision of the law, however, focused on those convicted of trafficking in 650 grams (about a pound and one-half) or more. The so-called drug-lifer provision mandated a life sentence with no chance of parole.

Under the drug-lifer law, a total of 238 people have been sentenced to life in prison through 1996, according to the Michigan Department of Corrections.

Of those, 70 — or almost 30 percent — were sentenced from

Oakland County.

Oakland was the most prolific county in terms of sending defendants to prison for life under the drug-lifer law. The total for all of Wayne County might have been higher in Oakland's except that some of them were sentenced from Detroit Records Court.

Some of those sentenced from Oakland were highly publicized. Ragede Akrawi, then 23, for example, was identified by then prosecutor Richard Thompson as part of the infamous Kalasho Organization when indicted by the Oakland County Citizens Grand Jury in July 1990.

Others generated much less publicity. California resident Mindy Brass, then 34, for example, generated little publicity when she and her codefendants were arrested as part of a 1991 drug bust in Troy.

One of those who escaped the full brunt of Michigan's drug-lifer law is television star Tim Allen, a graduate of Birmingham Seaholm High. The now-famous tool man was arrested in 1978 when he tried to sell more than a pound of cocaine to an undercover police officer in Kalamazoo.

Allen spent about two years in a federal prison — rather than mandatory life in a state lockup — after his testimony to a federal grand jury led to numerous indictments.

"It's not just the drug-lifer law

we're trying to change," said State Sen. William Van Regenmorter, R-Jenison. "We're trying to change all the mandatory minimum drug laws."

In 1991, Van Regenmorter, currently chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, held public hearings on Michigan's drug laws. Despite testimony and urgings from Oakland Circuit Judge David Brock, a Birmingham resident, and U.S. District Judge Averil Cohn, a West Bloomfield resident, no changes were made.

Michigan's drug laws remained the toughest in the nation, prescribing penalties two or three times as harsh as other state or federal statutes.

Oakland Circuit Judge Barry L. Howard is among those who this week voiced optimism about the prospect of Van Regenmorter's proposed changes in state drug laws. Howard was one of the Oakland County people with whom Van Regenmorter conferred before introducing his legislation.

"This is definitely a step in the right direction," said Howard, who was attending a meeting of the Michigan Judges Association Tuesday in Lansing. "It's an attempt to start bringing reality into the drug laws. Everybody wants tough justice. But this change would merge tough justice with smart justice."

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intolerances and are less threatened by things that are different. That leads us to move ahead and to grow," she added.

Bachrouche cites the campus's current discussion series on racism, which runs through March 20, as a prime example of a Diversity Committee-sponsored program intended not only to educate, but to encourage change as well. The series, entitled "Dialogue: Racism" has an agenda which includes presentations and talks on various topics relate to racial issues.

"We must move beyond awareness and really make racial understanding an integral part of people's lives. You can be aware, but still not incorporate the ideas. You can be aware all you want, but if you don't act on it, you won't get anywhere," Bachrouche said.

Dialogue: Racism, presented as part of the campus's Black History Month celebration, is co-sponsored by the Institute for the Healing of Racism in Southeast Michigan. Bachrouche hopes the series — held in J Building, the Student Activities Center — will stimulate interest in improving what she sees as "generally worsening" race relations.

"There seems to be less of a desire in many circles to want to take the effort to learn about others. Those who don't take it upon themselves to learn more tend to stay closer to their own group. People hear what they want to hear and tune into whatever will substantiate their own views. I want people to get beyond that, to see the benefits of looking beyond their own

views.

"What we're trying to do with Dialogue: Racism is to create an environment that will invite willingness, instill willingness in people to appreciate differences. Of course, to really effect thinking, there has to be more than just a program or two, but you have to start somewhere," she said.

Enid Burnett Roberts, who also co-chairs the Diversity Committee, concurs. "Our mission statement and purpose has developed from awareness, acknowledgment and acceptance to the promoting of the value of diversity, educating the college community about diversity, sensitizing the college community in respect to differences and similarities and encouraging innovative instructional techniques that effectively address the needs of the student population."

"And we are designed to be all-inclusive. We want everyone to feel a part of this diversity," Roberts said.

Another program honoring Black History Month is the Diversity Committee-sponsored "Moments in Black History" which is the distribution on campus of several different flyers featuring African Americans who have made a significant contribution to America. Works from African Americans poets will also be included on the flyers.

"We're really excited about

this, especially because two of those featured are instructors from our campus, Dr. Shavi Ali and Mr. Curtis Anderson," said Roberts, noting that Ali and Anderson are the only two African American full-time instructors on the Orchard Ridge campus.

And while Roberts said she believes race relations on the Orchard Ridge campus are improving, she'd like to see "more diversity among the staff" at the college. "And I try not to see race as just a black-white situation. Diversity is much more than that — there are many other groups. When we look at diversity, we don't want to lose anyone in the process."

"If we are to maintain the diversity of the community, we need to be diverse ourselves. It's important to inject different philosophies. It's something to work toward. It won't happen overnight, in fact it can't happen overnight, but it is something we need to be conscientious about. As long as we have dialogue, collaboration and hope, it is my expectation that we will make it to where we want to be. We aren't there yet, but we are getting there. We certainly are making progress."

For more information about the campus's Diversity Committee, call (810) 471-7693.

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