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GLOBE EDITORIAL

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The truth about CORI

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FEW ISSUES are more ripe for demagoguery than the question of access to the state's Criminal Offender Record Information system. For who, at first glance, would give criminal offenders a chance to conceal their pasts?

Well, Kerry Healey would, for one. As a member of the state's Criminal History Systems Board, she voted at least half a dozen times from 2000 to 2002 to restrict or deny access to CORI data by organizations seeking to run checks on potential workers, the Globe reported last week.

That's not to say her decisions were wrong. Public safety argues for some caution about granting access to the criminal-records system. Since most crimes don't carry life sentences, society has an interest in helping released prisoners gain purchase on life on the outside. Used improperly, CORI data can keep ex-cons from finding housing and honest jobs.

Healey seems to have understood this. But that was before she became lieutenant governor, and before this year, when she is seeking to close a large gap in the polls in the race for the state's top job. In recent weeks, Healey has tried to scare voters with Democrat Deval Patrick's support for limits on access to CORI.

The CORI system is imperfect. It records misdemeanors as well as felonies, and acquittals as well as convictions. Those data aren't easily interpreted by landlords and personnel departments. As a recent Boston Foundation study noted, access to CORI has expanded over time, but new users don't necessarily get the same training law enforcement agencies receive. As a result, people acquitted of misdemeanors can miss out on opportunities just as felons do.

Massachusetts needs a two-tier system in which police and other vital agencies -- schools, hospitals, human services -- can get all CORI data. Others should have access only to data on convictions and open cases, and should use that information judiciously.

The state's own hiring practices reveal the complexity of the situation. Reformed drug abusers, for example, can help others stay clean. But as the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute has documented, there are high barriers to hiring people with CORI files. While caution is in order, the state needs more discretion to hire ex-cons who can assist in important human services.

The failures of prisoner reentry represent a vast social problem -- particularly for poor minority communities, from which a disproportionate number of convicts and crime victims come. Candidates for governor should deal thoughtfully with that problem.

Instead, Healey so far has opted to run a standard-issue "tough on crime" campaign. But voters should know, as Healey once did, that crime demands a response that is both tough and smart. ■

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