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Bipartisan anti-crime proposal wins House approval

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Rep. Nate Gentry, R-Albuquerque

SANTA FE — The state House passed a broad package of anti-crime legislation Friday as Republicans and Democrats alike found common ground to take aim at New Mexico's high crime rate.

The proposal won approval on a 66-1 vote and now heads to the Senate. If approved there, it would go to Republican Gov. Susana Martinez, a former prosecutor who hasn't said whether she would sign the bill.

The 90-page proposal would increase penalties for violent felons caught with a firearm, help cities and counties provide \$15,000 retention bonuses to veteran police officers and reclassify certain nonviolent offenses — a move intended to allow prosecutors to focus on more serious cases.

The bill also has provisions aimed at getting treatment for inmates struggling with a mental illness or addiction, even after they leave jail.

The measure would tighten alcohol-testing requirements, too, for people who want to remove an ignition interlock device installed on their car.

House Republican Leader Nate Gentry of Albuquerque said the proposal, House Bill 19, is based on evidence of what has succeeded elsewhere.

"The reason I'm so excited about this proposal is we know it works," Gentry said.

The package is the result of work by Gentry; House Speaker Brian Egolf, D-Santa Fe; and other lawmakers who agreed to combine a variety of crime bills into one piece of legislation.

The goal, Egolf said, was to develop a comprehensive approach to crime — stiffening penalties, providing treatment and keeping experienced officers on the streets.

"This is one of the most exciting and one of the most important pieces of legislation that's gone through the Legislature since I've been a member," said Egolf, who was elected in 2008.

New Mexico had the nation's highest property crime rate and second-highest violent crime rate in 2016, the last year for which FBI data are available.

Martinez has pushed lawmakers to make crime a priority this session. Some of her ideas — such as expanding a child abuse law to cover teenage victims — have been resisted by some Democrats in the past.

"We're pleased to see the House is starting on crime legislation," Martinez spokesman Michael Lonergan said. "... The Governor hopes they will send her bills that will make our communities safer — like expanding Baby Brianna's Law, increasing penalties for those who use a gun committing a crime, and cracking down on drunk drivers."

Rep. Eliseo Alcon, D-Milan was the lone lawmaker to speak against the bill. He raised questions about the wisdom of combining so many separate bills into one.

"If we take this bill forward," Alcon said, "I see countless problems in the future for our courts and our law enforcement agencies, our district attorneys, our public defenders and everybody else."

Contact the writer.

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