

Drug law repeal urged

"Drop the Rock" stops in Albany as part of statewide campaign

By CATHY WOODRUFF, Staff writer

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ALBANY — Lewis Foster didn't have to think twice before signing a petition calling for repeal of New York's 35-year-old Rockefeller Drug Laws on Saturday.

"I think there's got to be a better way than locking people up and sending them to prison for years," said the 56-year-old Albany man. "I've been against it for years. It's people of color being sent away."

Foster was among several people who stopped Saturday morning in front of the Social Justice Center on Central Avenue to sign petitions circulated by the Correctional Association of New York.

Organizers of the campaign, called "Drop the Rock," are pushing for full repeal of the drug laws that were revised in 2005, citing continued restrictions on judicial sentencing discretion and lack of sufficient prison alternatives such as drug treatment, job training and education for low-level offenders.

"I'm excited about alternatives to incarceration," said Gavin Cook, a staff attorney with Prisoners Legal Services of New York, who carried petitions. "We can get a lot of mileage out of doing something differently."

Mandated sentences of eight-to-20 years remain in place for convictions on some relatively low-level drug sale and possession charges, Cook noted, and the penalties apply regardless of individual circumstances, personal history or addictions.

"People here in this community know that's unfair," Cook said. "A judge should have the discretion to make that determination."

For 18-year-old Ramar Taylor, who signed the petition, that point was key.

"It does seem like people who use drugs, maybe they should get some rehabilitation or something instead of time for it," he said.

While he stopped to chat, Taylor also mentioned that he plans to cast his first ballot this year but isn't yet registered. He received a registration form to fill out and return to the County Board of Elections from John Cirrin, a member of the local New York Civil Liberties Union chapter board and one of those carrying petitions.

Albany County District Attorney David Soares, who built a substantial portion of the campaign that first elected him in 2004 on opposition to the Rockefeller Drug Laws, joined the petition carriers for a while.

"I still feel that my candidacy has a lot to do with reforming the Rockefeller Drug Laws," he said, arguing that 2005 reforms left room for more improvement.

"Arresting and prosecuting low-level offenders who are committing low-level crimes and people with addictions is not the way to go."

Soares is challenged by Loudonville Republican Roger Cusick on the GOP-created Integrity ballot line. The two are scheduled to meet in a debate Tuesday night at Albany Law School.

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Voting rights facts

The deadline to register to vote in the Nov. 4 general election is Friday.

People convicted of felonies can register and vote in New York if they are not in prison or on parole.

Source: New York Civil Liberties Union