This statement is issued by Southern Illinois University’s Public Policy Institute, School of Law and the Center for the Study of Crime, Delinquency and Corrections. It reflects recommendations made by experts from throughout the nation, the State of Illinois and the region who participated in a symposium September 22-23, 1998, at Southern Illinois University.
A Fork in the Road: Build More Prisons —or— Develop New Strategies to Deal With Offenders?

The United States has been on an unprecedented prison-building binge since the mid-1970s. Between 1980 and 1997, the number of prisoners in the nation increased 250 percent. The financial costs have been staggering. In many states, spending on corrections has been the fastest growing item in their budget, claiming tax dollars that otherwise might have gone to such important priorities as education, child care subsidies, public health initiatives and efforts to preserve, protect and promote natural resources. In Illinois, the percentage of state operating funds spent on corrections tripled from 1978 to 1998. Since 1978, Illinois has added 24 correctional institutions. We believe there is a need – and the potential – to develop realistic alternatives to building one prison after another in Illinois and throughout the nation without compromising public safety. In fact, we believe the alternatives could enhance public safety and save taxpayer dollars by reducing the number of repeat offenders.

We offer the following policy and programmatic proposals for consideration by our elected officials and the public they serve:

- Reserve long-term imprisonment for the most violent and predatory offenders.
- Change current sentencing policies that require non-violent offenders, especially those convicted of minor drug offenses, to serve mandatory minimum prison sentences.
- Seriously consider allowing three-judge panels at the district level — rather than appellate judges — to review departures from federal sentencing guidelines so that judges most directly involved with defendants can determine whether discretion is warranted.
- Make sure that “three strikes and you’re out” and “truth in sentencing” laws are drawn tightly enough to impris-