DAVID ONEK: Welcome to the Criminal Justice Conversations podcast, a coproduction of the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice and the Berkeley School of Journalism. I'm your host David Onek. The podcast, recorded in the Berkeley School of Journalism studios, features in depth interviews with a wide range of criminal justice leaders: law enforcement officials, policy makers, advocates, service providers, academics, and others. The podcast gets behind the sound bites that far too often dominate the public dialogue about criminal justice to have detailed nuanced conversations about criminal justice policy.

Today’s guest is Patricia Caruso, who just retired as director of the Michigan Department of Corrections. As director, Caruso was responsible for 44,000 inmates in 34 prison facilities, as well as 78,000 probationers and parolees. Caruso worked for the Department of Corrections for over two decades, including nine years as a warden. In 2003, she was appointed as the
first woman director of the Department of Corrections. Under Caruso’s leadership as director, Michigan has significantly reduced both its prison population and its recidivism rate. Caruso has served as vice president of the American Correctional Association, president of the Association of State Correctional Administrators, and president of the North American Association of Wardens and Superintendents. She has a bachelor’s degree from Lake Superior University and a master’s degree in comprehensive occupational education from the University of Michigan. She joins us from a Michigan studio this morning. Pat Caruso, welcome to the program.

PATRICIA CARUSO: Thank you, David. It’s a pleasure to be here.

ONEK: Pat, can you describe the state of the Michigan prison system when you took over in 2003?

CARUSO: Certainly. You know, it was interesting because I often talk about what happened in Michigan as an opportunity that grew from crisis. And clearly, the crisis was the economic downturn that occurred in Michigan before it hit the rest of the country, and that was because of the downturn in the auto industry. Michigan was accustomed to being a wealthy state,
manufacturing based economy, and everything changed for us.
In the period of time I had worked for the department up to then, which was about 15 years at that point, we had like most states, a prison population that was increasing exponentially. And we didn’t really question that. We looked at our role as projecting where we thought the population would go, how many beds we would need in order to accommodate that. And then our job was to go to the legislature and others and insure the dollars were there, and the facilities in order to house the prisoners. Well, when this economic crisis hit, one of the things we did was we started looking at our system, and looking at the drivers of the system. And we started looking at what was being learned nationally, in terms of what works and what doesn’t. And one of the big things that occurred to us was that we had a little bit more control over this than we had ever given ourselves credit for. And so changing the way we approached it was really the first step in trying to control our population, first control it and then decrease it. So at the time I became the director, we had about 50,000 prisoners. We had, I don’t even remember today, I think 42, 43 prisons and prison camps, 18,000 employees. I mean it was a huge system. We were bumping up on a $2 billion budget. And it was just not sustainable. Not sustainable just in dollars, but not
sustainable on any level.

ONEK: So as you came in and began to have this realization, what did you do to turn things around?

CARUSO: Well, one of the things that we looked at, and this is something that’s different in every state, is looking at what the sentencing structure is like in that state, and working within that. Because it’s easy to immediately jump to changing some laws. I remember a very senior legislator telling me that before I asked him to lead that charge, I needed to take care administratively of what needed to be done, and it was very good advice given to me. So Michigan is an indeterminate sentencing state, which means prisoners are sentenced to a range of years, say five to 20. And we’re also a 100% truth in sentencing state, which means that people are required to serve 100% of that minimum sentence. So on a five to 20, you must serve 100% of five. And then after that, you are under the auspices of the parole board. And the parole board then makes a decision somewhere between five and 20, based on all kinds of information, whether or not you are an appropriate risk for parole. When I became the director, we had about 50,000 prisoners. More than 17,000 of them, who were incarcerated,
serving time, had served past that minimum sentence, passed the five in my example. So we started looking at some of the factors that drove that and looking at what was missing and what were the gaps, and addressing those issues. That was something that could be done relatively quickly, looking at that. Beyond that, we looked at the whole system and started looking at what our focus was, and I often tell the story when I was a warden, I thought, and I would say appropriately, I looked at my job as everyone goes home safely every day, keep the lid on the joint. That’s pretty important stuff when you’re a warden. But I never thought of my job as being something beyond that, and being invested in whether these men got out and stayed out. I will tell you all of our wardens today look at that as part of their job. So a huge culture change had to be undertaken to look at our role in this whole continuum of the criminal justice spectrum and figure out that we had a much larger role to play than just that important one.

ONEK: How did you personally come to that realization as you talked about your time as a warden and the way you saw things at that point. At what point, was there one moment where you kind of said, I get it now, I really think we need to look at this differently?
CARUSO: Well, you know, there were definitely pieces of this that were a conversion for me. And I wasn’t someone who had always believed this. I’ll be honest with you. I was comfortable being a warden. I was comfortable locking people up. I actually, I have a story that I tell that is a true story from when I was a warden, and it was one of those light bulb moments. I was walking around in the yard of the prison and I ran across a prisoner who asked me about getting a transfer. And I was a prisoner, I was a prisoner [LAUGHTER]. I was a warden in the upper peninsula of Michigan, and it’s a pretty common request. The prisoners want to transfer downstate where they’re more likely to be from. So the prisoner asked for a transfer and he tells me, as an aside, that he’s just there as a parole violator. And I explain to him that he was at the bottom of my list, that he had what all these other men wanted. I said look around. Everyone wants freedom. You had freedom and you’re back. And then I asked him, what did you do to come back to prison? And he says, well, I was out and I was doing well. I was working and I was supporting myself and I left work and headed home, and I had a curfew, but I stopped at the grocery store to buy pork chops for dinner. And I got home five minutes late, past my curfew, and I was violated and sent
back to prison. Well, I didn’t believe him when he told me the story. But I wrote down his name and number, and I went back to my office and I pulled his file and I read it. And the same story he told me was in it, and I still followed up. I made a couple phone calls. And I learned that in fact, this person who was supporting himself in the community was in prison because he got home five minutes late. And it really made me question how we make these decisions, and who’s a risk. Who are we afraid of and who are we mad at? And that was probably the first moment when I started to think differently about what our role was.

ONEK: You know, that last quote you just said was almost an exact quote of what Matthew Cate, the head of the California Department of Corrections, said, that we need to focus on who is a risk, rather than who we are mad at when we look at these decisions. So it’s very interesting to hear you say almost that exact language. Now, I want to turn to the concept of justice reinvestment, something Michigan is now seen as a model in. Can you define that term for us?

CARUSO: I will define it as I define it, which, in Michigan, meant that as we started on changing our culture and as we started doing things differently, we recognize that our
incarcerated population would start to decline. And we made a decision that as that happened, we would reinvest one third of the monies. And we picked that amount. One third. And we would reinvest it into resources that would help support the effort of keeping that population down and continuing to go down. And so, we reinvested in things like additional agents in the community. We reinvested in things like residential beds. In Michigan we now have access to more than 4,000 beds throughout the state of Michigan. For things like substance abuse treatment or mental health treatment, whatever it is. We reinvested in GPS, so that people who are able to be safely and successfully monitored in the community on a GPS system, as opposed to in prison. So reinvestment for us meant partnering with communities and organizations and businesses, all around the state with the end result being safer communities.

ONEK: Was the reluctance from the legislator to reinvest that one third with the budget crisis Michigan was facing, as many states now face, there must have been enormous pressure to capture that one third to do deal with the budget crisis, rather than reinvesting it into these types of things. How did you handle that?
CARUSO: You know, amazingly, there was not the reluctance that I expected there would be. And I have said this many times, and I put so much credit on our then governor, Governor Granholm, and our legislators. Both sides of the aisle. They stuck with the reinvestment, they got it. I’m not saying there were never any discussions, but every budget came through with the reinvestment in it. The governor proposed it. The legislature, for the most part, supported it, and in some cases, wanted more reinvestment than what we were proposing. Because people understood that the easy and quick thing to do was to open the doors and kick people out. And you can do that in a prison system. But it’s not sustainable. It doesn’t make for safer communities. And we made a decision collectively that that was what we wanted. We wanted sustainable reduction in savings and we wanted communities that were safer.

ONEK: And is there a guarantee of any kind that this funding will continue into the future? In California and other states, there are debates about moving more prisoners back to the local level and maybe with the promise of funding for a two year, three year, five year period. But one of the concerns that counties and other localities are saying is what if we lose this funding stream down the line, then we’re going to be stuck with
all these folks without the resources to help them. Is there any, do you have any sense in the long term, will that funding continue to go to the county level and be reinvested?

CARUSO: Well, I guess I would say upfront, first of all, there are no guarantees. As with any, I mean just like in business, I mean in government, you make decisions based on what’s available, and you can’t always foresee what’s coming down the road. So while there certainly is an intent, there’s not a guarantee of that. And depending on the length of budget cycles, etc., in Michigan we still have a one year budget cycle. So your commitment is year to year. But beyond that, certainly when we look at what works, and when we look at now, where the economy in most states is very tenuous and we look at the cost of incarcerating someone and the cost of supervising someone in the community. In Michigan, the average annual cost of incarcerating someone is somewhere around 34, $35,000 a year on an average. The average cost of supervising someone in the community is just over $3,000 a year. That is a huge difference. And people in the community are able to work and help support their families and do other things as well. So it is not as difficult to sell as it ought to be. And I know, speaking with my colleagues around the country, in some states,
there has been a huge reluctance to make the commitment for the reinvestment because of a fear that they can’t afford it. They need 100% of the savings to go towards the bottom line. But in the long run, that type of thinking will grow your prison population.

ONEK: Absolutely the argument we’ve been making out here, so it’s good to hear it from you. Can you tell us, what have been the outcomes? What have been the successes of justice reinvestment in Michigan?

CARUSO: Well, clearly, just in pure numbers, one of the successes is that our population is down significantly. We hit our all-time high incarcerated population in Michigan in March of 2007, and the all-time high was 51,556 people incarcerated in Michigan. And today, that number is down under 44,000. The mid-43,000s of people incarcerated in Michigan. So that alone, there’s a success right there. But to go with that is the fact that when we started this, we were looking at about one in two persons who got out of prison were coming back. And we’re now at about one in three, and that number is actually improving as time goes along and as we identify more and better resources and are able to target resources more appropriately to
individuals, we see more success. We have subpopulations that we’ve identified. A great example are the mentally ill, who, with a certain amount of resource, have extremely high success rates. And so we continue to refine that and target it.

ONEK: Now, some of the credit for the success in lowering recidivism rates in Michigan has gone to your innovative prisoner reentry initiative. Could you tell us a little bit about that initiative?

CARUSO: Well, the prisoner reentry initiative is really the flagship of what we did in Michigan. We reached out early on when we started this process and did some work with the National Institute of Corrections. We actually adopted their model, which was the transition from prison to community model. Our prisoner reentry initiative is based on that model. And we also partnered with the National Governors Association, and put these models into place. And so the focus of the reentry initiative really is to ensure the right resources are in the right places, to ensure that people can get out and stay out successfully. And that is both prison based, in terms of that culture in the prisons and how we do time in prison, and it’s community based, what happens when people get out, and it also is an overlap,
where an overlap between the community and the prison, where as an example, teams of people from the community where someone is paroling to actually come into the prison, and meet with the prisoner before he or she leaves to go to their community. So it’s all of that together, and the focus on success and safe communities.

ONEK: Did law enforcement and correction officials initially see reentry as part of their job?

CARUSO: No. And I mean just as I said, when I was a warden, that I didn’t see it as part of my job. One of my favorite stories I tell, in the last year and a half or so, I spent a lot of time traveling to communities all over the state, our reentry communities and speaking with law enforcement and I mean just people from all walks of life. And one of the first meetings I attended like this, there was a lieutenant from the state police there. And he told this incredible story, and he was there with a young man who he later introduced. But he said he never saw this as part of his job. And at some point, he decided if he was really about safer communities, he needed to get involved. And so he started coming to the prison that was what we call an inreach facility, so people would parole from that prison into
his community. Well, he started going there and meeting with
the men who would be paroling, and talking to them. Introduced
himself. He gave out his business card. Said if you have a
problem, let me know, and he made it very clear to them, don’t
call me after you’re in trouble. This is not get out of jail
free card, call me before. And then he introduced a young man
with him who talked about how he met the lieutenant when he was
in prison, and he got out and he had a problem. And he called
the lieutenant. The lieutenant said come down to the post,
and helped him through. It was a pretty significant problem.
Helped him through, and now, the lieutenant is mentoring that
man and eight or nine others who have been in prison. And it
was funny, because they came to the meeting together and this
young man says, they came in the police cruiser, and he says he
got in and he looked around and he says, man, I’m in the front
seat. [LAUGHTER] And he says, this is a different place for
me. Well, it’s all about that culture change. Looking at your
role in safer communities differently.

ONEK: Let’s talk about, I want to ask you about a statement
that you’ve talked about, that a state legislator said to you,
which was essentially, people wouldn’t come back to prison if
you didn’t treat them so well when they’re in prison. What was
and what is your response to that statement?

CARUSO: I remember it well. We were in a legislative hearing, a public hearing, and we were talking about recidivism. And the legislator, I mean really not maliciously, just said to me that if we didn’t treat them so well, we wouldn’t have a recidivism problem. And you know what? That sounds very logical. I mean that is an intuitive response for the average person who’s never going to be in prison. But the truth is that all of the research will tell you that people who are treated inhumanely become more inhumane. And people who leave prison with less ability to respond appropriately and less resources are more likely to reoffend. People who are treated poorly in prison, it may not make sense to you and I, David, because we’re not going to prison, but those people are more likely to go back to prison because they have less coping skills when they get out. Now, I’m not saying that I know prisons aren’t country clubs. I hear people say that all the time. They’re not. I mean I've spent a lot of time in prison, they’re not country clubs. But there are levels of appropriate expectations and behavior and a humane living environment and conditions, and opportunities that will result in more success for people who leave prison. People who are treated respectfully are more likely to be respectful.
ONEK: One program in prison that’s been very effective during your tenure has been the prison creative arts project, and you’ll be attending the opening tonight of their annual exhibition of art by Michigan prisoners. It’s the largest exhibition of prisoner art in the country, and this is a collaboration with the University of Michigan. Can you tell us a little bit more about the project, and can you also share the story of a particular artist you’ve met through the project, and the impact it’s had?

CARUSO: Well, it is a wonderful story. This is the 16th year of the project, and to my knowledge, is the largest partnership in existence like that in the world, between the department of corrections and a university. Every year the university visits all of our prison facilities to seek out original artwork by prisoners. And the artwork is in the form of paintings. There’s pencil sketchings. Some of it is written, poetry and other types of writings. And they collect really exhibit worthy art all over the state, to be exhibited at the Duderstadt Gallery at the University of Michigan. And it’s a very powerful experience for the men and women who create this art, to know that their art is being exhibited. And it’s filmed, and the
filming is then provided back to the prisoners so the artist can see it. Last year, when I was there, was something really unusual happened because it was the first time there were so many artists in attendance. There were 13 artists there on opening night. So these were people who had been incarcerated during the year when their art was chosen, but had since gotten out and were still out. And so they came to the exhibit opening night, and each of them spoke. And the words were very powerful, to talk about what it meant to the people inside, to know that this was going on outside. And many of them had found employment through this, but had also found mentoring opportunities and a sense of wholeness for themselves. And some of the remarks were incredible. And one woman stood up and talked about how important this had been to her, and she turned around and introduced her parole agent, who was there with her. And the parole agent came from an office that was at least an hour and a half away. I mean she was there in the evening. She came in support and she had another agent with her, of this woman who was on her caseload, because she knew how important it was to her. And so when we talk about collaborative case management and that holistic approach to supervision, that’s the kind of thing that we’re talking about. So it’s very, very meaningful for them. I’m very much looking forward to it.
tonight. In fact, the university tonight is going to give me a piece of original artwork as a thank you for the support of their program. I’m very excited about it.

ONEK: Well, congratulations on that. Now, I want to turn to talking about the way policy is made in Michigan. In a lot of places around the country, we sometimes have a single, horribly tragic case that leads to major legal changes that end up having little to do with the case that inspired them. A case in point, in California is the Three Strikes Initiative, which followed the horrible murder of Polly Klaas and was sold to voters as putting repeat murderers and rapists behind bars forever. But as we discussed on the last podcast episode with Michael Romano, of the Stanford Three Strikes Project, the majority of people actually sentenced to life under Three Strikes have been sentenced for nonviolent crimes, in one case, stealing a pair of socks. Has Michigan had similar high profile cases that have led to calls for wide-ranging policy changes? And if so, how have you handled that?

CARUSO: We have certainly had similar high profile cases. Every state has. And there’s always a call for some kind of a response. And typically, you’re looking at some horrific crime
that happened, and really, in defense of the legislators who proposed this legislation, people don’t do that maliciously. They’re horrified by what’s happened and they feel an obligation to try and do something to ensure no one else has to go through that. But the problem is that, I think it’s kind of a human nature thing, is this tendency to perhaps overreach or not look at all of the consequences of that. I actually was surprised during my tenure, in some of the really horrible things that happened, that we didn’t go down that road. I’m thinking of one crime in particular where there was certainly discussion of that type of kneejerk sort of legislation, but ultimately, it didn’t occur. Things were introduced, there was discussion, looked at what the ramifications would be, and people backed off. And so, I don’t know if it was just a matter of cooler heads prevailed, if we were able to provide enough data that said it doesn’t get us where we want to go. But I think every state has some level of that. In Michigan, the big driver of our population is not who comes into the system, but how long they stay. And some of the length of sentence issues in Michigan historically go back to exactly those types of things, where we have very long sentences for some crimes that in other states, you would not do that kind of time.
ONEK: What lessons would you say you’ve learned that could be relevant to leaders in California and elsewhere, other states that are really at the point of crisis, or even in greater crisis, one could argue, than Michigan was when you became director?

CARUSO: I remember being asked one time, I was speaking at a conference about what we were doing in Michigan, and someone asked me what was the most difficult part of what we’d done. And before I answered, I remember he answered the question himself. He said, oh, I know, you’re from Michigan, it was the budget and the economy. And I remember saying to him, no, it actually wasn’t that. It was the culture change. Changing the culture and thinking differently about what we were doing and what our responsibility is is the most difficult. I was reminded of that very, very clearly last year. I was in one of these community meetings I’d been going to, attended by law enforcement and local educators, community providers, and men and women who had been incarcerated. And a man stood up who had done at least 10 years in our system. And he was out successfully. And he was talking about what he was doing. And he said something that I have never forgotten, and what he said was, when you change the way you look at things, the things you
look at change. And I remember thinking, wow, that applies to so many things. I mean it really is like the definitive description of our reentry initiative. When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change. When you change the way you look at what your responsibility is, or the people you supervise, or how you supervise, everything about it. And so, one of the pieces of advice I give to people is to be open to changing the way you look at this. I never questioned what our role was in locking people up. For years and years, I never questioned it. I certainly didn’t when I was a warden. I saw that population going up, up, up, up, and it never said anything to me other than that was the way it was, that we couldn’t change that. And now, I know for sure that that’s not true.

ONEK: One last question. I want to talk about, you came onboard as the first woman ever to head the Michigan Department of Corrections. Did you face any resistance because of that?

CARUSO: I never felt I faced any resistance because I was a woman, and I think Michigan has a pretty good history in terms of opportunities for women. I became a warden in 1991 at a male prison. I was far from being the first woman warden
in the state. We had women working in the cell blocks in our facilities for years. I just didn’t feel it. I mean I certainly had disagreements with people, but it wasn’t because of my gender. I did feel, I mean the thing on the other side, though, was I had many, many women in the department reach out to me because they felt pride in having a woman head up the department, and they felt opportunity existed. And so, there was that piece. It was a positive, not a negative example of it, but I will tell you, too, David, is that I don’t look for those kinds of problems either. I’m not someone who always thinks oh, you said that because I’m a woman. I never think that. You’ve got to be pretty tough to do these jobs and be in this business, and I am and I don’t look for insults, and I never saw any as being a woman director of the department of corrections.

ONEK: And now that you’ve moved on, have you helped mentor a number of other women who are rising up through the ranks of the department of corrections to have leadership roles in the future?

CARUSO: Well, as director in our department, it was one of the things I tried to do and offer some things for the women.
And I also participate in professional organizations outside of Michigan, national organizations, whose job it is to mentor women and help them move up to the highest ranks in their departments around the country, and so that is something I feel that I was the recipient of that type of support and mentoring from women in my state and in other states, and I think part of my obligation is to pass that on and reach back to others. So I certainly hope that I’m able to emulate those women who are great examples in my life.

ONEK: And now that you’ve retired officially from the Michigan Department of Corrections, you obviously have a wealth of knowledge and information and insights to share with the rest of the country. How do you plan to do that going forward?

CARUSO: Well, it’s funny. In some ways, I’m actually busier and more active than I was when I was the director, just at a different schedule. But I am doing some advising and consulting work in the corrections field. I’m doing a lot of speaking nationally, much of it on exactly the issue you and I are talking about today. And I’m hoping to also do some pieces of advocacy work in some areas where perhaps I wasn’t as able to do that when I was the director. So I’m very excited about what
the future holds for me.

ONEK: Well, Pat Caruso, thanks so much for joining us.

CARUSO: Thank you, David. It’s been a pleasure.

ONEK: Please tune in next week when we’ll be joined by Sujatha Baliga, Program Director of Community Justice Works. Thank you for listening to the Criminal Justice Conversations Podcast. You can find this episode of the program, and all prior episodes, on our website at www.law.berkeley.edu/cjconversations, on NPR KALW’s website, and on iTunes. You can also become a fan of Criminal Justice Conversations on Facebook, and you can follow us on Twitter on CJ Conversations. The podcast is engineered by Jim Richards. Our program intern is Sheridan Block, and our research interns are Katie Henderson and Karim Copper. I’m David Onek. Thanks for listening.