

Shrinking Prisons

States are consolidating and closing prisons as reforms and budget cuts decrease inmate populations.

BY ALISON LAWRENCE

Americans believe too many people are in prison and the nation spends too much keeping them there. But they also are concerned about keeping our streets safe, according to polling from 2012.

State legislatures are addressing all three concerns with policies that reduce prison populations and maintain public safety, and at the same time lower costs. In 15 states prison populations have been reduced enough to warrant closing some correctional facilities.

Corrections officials across the country reduced expenses by 3 percent in FY 2010. That's the largest reduction of any major budget category in recent years, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers. Staff furloughs and administrative changes helped, but larger and potentially more sustainable reductions have come as a result of sentencing and corrections policy changes. Because of successful reforms, more offenders are safely supervised in the community and recidivism rates are down.

Prison Politics

Nearly \$9 out of every \$10 spent on corrections goes toward running state prisons, according to a recent study by the Pew Center on the States.

So while it makes budgetary sense to close prisons, it can have a negative economic impact on local prison communities. In particular, public unions have resisted prison closures, citing job losses and public safety concerns. Others say downsizing prisons is necessary for a stronger economy, to spur future job growth in other areas and lessen the burden on taxpayers. Often, officials conduct impact analysis to identify, for closure, facilities with the highest operating costs and least efficient to run. Lawmakers often direct a portion of the savings from shutting

down prisons to localities to increase funding for effective community supervision programs.

Debates on closures can be laborious and contentious. In Illinois, the legislature, governor and correctional employees have been in contentious negotiations over the potential closure of two prisons for more than six months.

In Michigan as well, lawmakers were divided on whether to close another prison. Michigan's prison population has dropped by 8,000 inmates over the last five years, prompting the closing of 14 correctional facilities there already. Funding for re-entry and community supervision programs in Michigan has increased, and fewer offenders are returning to prison for breaking the rules. Parole is granted more often to nonviolent offenders, leading to an uptick in prison releases. At the same time, there has been a double digit decrease in recidivism.

Yet, even though the corrections budget has benefited from these closures, department costs for personnel and contracts, including prison health care, continue to rise. Looking for ways to cut expenses last year, a proposal was put forth to close a Detroit prison and re-open a facility on the western edge of the state. Lawmakers were divided on the benefits.

"We just recently closed one of the state's newest facilities in Detroit," says Senator Glenn

Anderson (D). "The closure of another Detroit facility will only further damage the effectiveness of the prison system, drastically increase prison transfer costs, and have an unforeseen impact on the local economy."

In the end, a compromise was reached to "re-purpose" the Detroit facility to hold only special-needs inmates and probation and parole violators. Other cost-saving measures included reducing administrative support and improving the competitive bidding process for inmate health care and food services.

"This approach will help us provide safety in a more cost-

States That Have Closed Prisons (2011 or 2012)

Colorado
Connecticut
Florida
Georgia
Kentucky
Louisiana
Michigan
Nevada
New York
North Carolina
Rhode Island
South Carolina
Texas
Virginia
Washington



Senator
Glenn
Anderson (D)
Michigan

State Prisoners By the Numbers

1,289,376

State prisoners, as of
Dec. 31, 2011

649,677

Prisoners admitted in 2010

656,190

Prisoners released in 2010

+1.1%

Annual change in number of
prisoners, 2000 – 2010

-1.9%

Average annual change in number
of prisoners, 2010 – 2011

26

States with fewer prisoners from
Dec. 31, 2008 to Jan. 1, 2010

Sources: Pew Center on the States,
Public Safety Performance Project,
State expenditure reports, National
Association of State Budget Officers,
Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S.
Department of Justice

effective manner,” says Senator John Proos (R). He believes Michigan must continue to “reduce prison costs to enable the state to focus resources on other priorities, like education.”



Senator
John Proos (R)
Michigan

Economic Opportunity

Although prison closures can create significant heartache for small towns or rural areas dependent on the jobs and other economic benefits they provide, not so in Sugar Land, Texas.

When the state proposed closing the 230-acre Central Unit prison in 2011, many local and elected officials in this prosperous suburb south of Houston envisioned the potential benefits.

An economic and tax impact analysis of closing the facility by the Department of Criminal Justice projected that development of the property could produce \$4.6 million in new state revenue and \$1 million for Sugar Land, and create 3,300 jobs.

City leaders produced a comprehensive development plan, which described the property (next to an airport with access to rail) as “one of the last large-scale, commercial and industrial development oppor-

tunities within city limits.”

Texas Senator Glenn Hegar (R), whose district includes former Central Unit prison, cited very high maintenance costs at the more than 100-year-old prison while in recent years development has driven up property values in the area.

“It was time for the Department of Criminal Justice to move on plans to house those prisoners elsewhere and sell the property, providing a better investment for Texas taxpayers,” he says.

And it did. The Texas Legislative Budget Board reported in 2011 that the closure (that sent the remaining minimum security inmates and employees to other state facilities) would save the corrections budget \$25 million. As far as the land, it is currently held by the state’s General Land Office with developers considering the possibilities.

Prison consolidations and closures can significantly reduce prison costs. Balancing that savings with the economic losses felt by communities near those prisons is difficult, but can present new opportunities.



Senator
Glenn
Hegar (R)
Texas