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Tuesday, April 15, 2008

**BEHIND BARS: Second of a two-part series**

# State seeks strategies to control prison costs

## Boot camp expansion, other fixes to provide only short-term relief

**Gary Heinlein and Charlie Cain / Detroit News Lansing Bureau**

Michigan's prison crunch will continue until at least 2010, because state policymakers have abandoned plans to revise sentencing policies and free old, sick and nonviolent convicts.

And in the meantime, the meter keeps ticking: It costs \$5 million a day, or almost \$2 billion a year, to run the state prison system whose population stands at 50,200 and is projected to top 56,000 within five years.

But there's at least some cause for optimism.

Michigan has agreed to work with the nonpartisan national Council of State Governments, which will spend two or three years helping the state devise ways of controlling costs and inmate populations.

The goal is to circumvent the years-long partisan fray with an objective examination of Michigan's crime trends and corrections system. And there may be interim measures -- such as doubling the size of the 440-bed state boot camp at Chelsea -- to avoid the cost of additional prison beds.

The Granholm administration and Senate Republicans have been at loggerheads over prison policy. Last year the governor's proposal to release more than 5,000 nonviolent inmates was quickly shot down by lawmakers.

"We've got to take a different approach, considering the politics," said Deputy Corrections Director Dennis Schrantz. "We propose, they oppose and we just end up with a budget problem."

Sen. Alan Cropsey of DeWitt, the state's most influential Republican voice on prison policies, continues to defend tough rules that have prevailed since the 1990s and added 16 prisons to Michigan's landscape.

That unbending opposition from Cropsey, law enforcement professionals, victims' families and other lawmakers convinced Gov. Jennifer Granholm to back off her three-year campaign to ease harsh

sentencing policies and save \$92 million by releasing more than 5,000 inmates.

"What we are working on this year are the shorter-term reforms," she told The Detroit News.

"However, they still are working with us on longer-term reforms which we hope to implement next year. Those involve the sentencing reforms that will be necessary to bring us in line with other states."

Michael Thompson, director of the Council of State Government's Justice Center, is heading the effort to help Michigan come up with effective and less expensive strategies for dealing with its lawbreakers.

He said states have determined that a massive prison buildup, like the one pursued in Michigan in the late 1980s, has done nothing to reduce recidivism rates -- repeat crimes by those who've spent time behind bars.

Probation and parole violators accounted for 58 percent of all offenders shipped off to prison last year -- down a bit from 62 percent the year before.

"If we're going to spend that much money, we at least should be getting better results," Thompson told lawmakers at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in mid-March.

#### **Granholm's proposals**

While the Justice Center conducts its study, Granholm wants to save \$50 million and avoid overcrowding through modest measures this year:

- Expanding the Chelsea boot camp to include second-time offenders in its rigorous, military-style, 90-day program. Current rules say only first-time lawbreakers are eligible. That, requiring legislation, would buy more time before all the prison cells are filled.
- Putting 500 additional low-risk offenders on electronic tethers. Today, nearly 2,600 people are on tethers, nearly all of them parolees and probationers. Their movements are restricted and in some cases monitored through GPS technology. The annual cost is \$2,000 each, compared with an average of more than \$31,325 a year behind prison bars.
- Expanding a "re-entry" program intended to prepare inmates for their release from prison through training in jobs, writing and other skills. Two months before their sentences end, they are moved to prisons or camps near their homes to begin the process.
- Possibly contracting privately for portions of the prison transportation and food service systems, now run by state workers.
- Holding more parole hearings in hopes of scaling back the inmate population. Currently, 14,000 have served more than their minimum sentences.

The legislative debate on these measures is just starting and Cropsey already has criticized some of them. He said the Chelsea boot camp needs changes to improve its success rate before it's expanded.

Cropsey also said more than half the \$50 million in savings is based on vague expectations from proposed new programs, rather than real spending cuts.

The more difficult and substantial savings are expected to be outlined by the Justice Center.

Thompson plans to issue his first Michigan report by the end of this year. Hints of what it might include can be gleaned from the programs adopted in other states.

Texas, for example, has more than 150,000 state inmates and was facing a 17,000-bed shortfall by 2012. Lawmakers, working with the Justice Center, adopted policies designed to save \$241 million in prison construction over the next two years.

The money is to be reinvested in expanded in-prison and community-based treatment and diversion programs.

Texas will:

- Add 800 beds in community residential programs.
- Expand outpatient substance abuse treatment by 3,000 convicts.
- Boost the number of halfway house beds by 300.
- Expand in-prison intensive substance abuse programs by 1,500.
- Create 1,400 beds in facilities that are intended to keep parole and probation violators from being returned to prison, according to the Justice Center.

While Granholm has backed off more profound changes for now, policymakers eventually could be prompted to re-examine Michigan's tough sentencing guidelines; its Truth in Sentencing law that requires each offender to serve at least the minimum sentence in a prison or camp rather than part of it in a halfway house or on a tether; and its "no good-time" rule.

Michigan and Wisconsin are the only two states that don't permit good time, under which inmates can cut their prison time with good behavior. Others follow federal guidelines, allowing inmates to be paroled after serving, on average, 85 percent of their minimum sentences.

#### **Lighter sentences critiqued**

Oakland County Sheriff Mike Bouchard is comfortable with at least some of this year's modest measures, which parallel his own efforts to avoid overcrowding.

Bouchard said his department saves more than \$1 million a year by privatizing the jail's food service and more than \$600,000 by diverting mentally ill offenders into treatment programs.

He'll have to be persuaded, however, that lighter state prison sentences are a good idea.

"I can't necessarily agree with that and, right out of the box, most law enforcement has not," Bouchard said.

He pointed to last year's arrest of a 27-year-old parolee, with a history of crimes including car theft and larceny, in the murders of as many as five Lansing women.

"The accused killer in Lansing was in prison for some of the kinds of crimes they're now talking about downgrading," Bouchard said.

Sen. Cropsey, who sits on the Justice Center's board of directors, also will look hard at any proposed relaxing of penalties.

He has compiled an array of statistics to buttress his argument that Michigan remains a violent state needing tough penalties.

More than 56,000 violent crimes are committed, for example, and Cropsey said he believes the real number is nearly double that. Crimes such as rape are undercounted because many victims don't file police reports, he said.

"The odds are that one in three Michigan residents will be a victim of violent crime at some time during their lives," Cropsey said.

But the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, usually an ally of conservatives, favors sentencing reforms.

"Caging a nonviolent offender for an excessively long time punishes taxpayers as well as the criminal while doing little for public safety," Kenneth M. Braun, its budget expert, concluded in a 2007 report.

Barbara Levine, executive director of the nonprofit Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending, agrees.


"We've allowed fear, not evidence, to drive our sentencing, parole and good-time policies," she said.

"For the sake of being punitive, we pay tens of millions of dollars to house, guard and provide medical care for people who are years, often decades, past the point of harming anyone."

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