

A welcome shaking

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John Whitmire is bulldog-angry. The Houston lawmaker, the longest-serving member of the state Senate and chairman of its Criminal Justice Committee, has sunk his teeth deep into the Texas prison system and clearly intends to shake it until some of its stupider practices fall by the wayside.

This is not Whitmire's first fight with the people who run the prisons. He has headed the Criminal Justice Committee or been one of its most influential members since at least 1993.

He's not just experienced -- he's armed with facts, and he's got a good point.

System administrators, who already spend \$2.5 billion a year running 106 prisons scattered throughout the state, are asking for an additional \$899 million in construction and operational funds to alleviate overcrowding.

Whitmire wants them to clean up their act first -- to clear out the extensive backlog of nonviolent prisoners eligible for parole, hundreds of them already approved for release but still locked up for months awaiting space in overburdened treatment programs or halfway houses.

Whitmire says if Texas wants yet another way to head off the 17,332-bed shortage predicted for state prisons five years from now, the state should look at the thousands of probationers who are returned to the lockups every year -- not for committing further crimes but for "technical violations" like being late for an assigned meeting or failing to pay a fee. There were 12,440 such revocations last year, down from a 2004 peak of 24,609.

And what's really lacking in Texas prisons, the senator says, is a sense of urgency about solving problems. Administrators are too inclined to mask those problems by just building more prisons.

"If somebody tells you we can build a couple more [prisons], that takes the pressure off of doing it better," Whitmire told those administrators during a Tuesday hearing in Austin.

Whitmire, a Democrat, has allies in this fight. He was joined at Tuesday's hearing not only by members of his own committee but by their counterparts on the House Corrections Committee, headed by Republican state Rep. Jerry Madden of Richardson. The Sunset Advisory Commission, led by Sen. Kim Brimer of Fort Worth, has said that the state's criminal justice system is "at a crossroads" and has called for improvements.

At the urging of Whitmire, Madden and Brimer and with support from the U.S. Department of Justice and the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Council of State Governments Justice Center studied the problems of Texas prisons and recommended solutions such as parole reforms for nonviolent criminals, additional DWI and substance abuse efforts, halfway houses and mental health treatment-oriented facilities and services. During the next five years, those programs could solve prison overcrowding and save the state more than \$600 million in operational expenses -- plus \$377.7 million in avoided construction costs.

No doubt this issue will be a prime subject for debate in the current legislative session. Despite having spent more than \$2.3 billion on new prison beds in recent years, some in the Legislature and among their leadership still want to act like they are being tough on crime by building still more prisons and locking up more people.

At least in the case of nonviolent offenders, there are better, smarter, less costly ways to mete out justice and keep our streets safe. Whitmire is pushing those ways. He's right, and he's exactly the right person to be leading this effort.

Fight on, senator.

<http://www.dfw.com/ml/dfw/news/opinion/16606060.htm>