

## **Editorial: Texas prisons need more treatment programs**

Tuesday, February 06, 2007

Texas lawmakers need to come up with alternatives to the politically popular “lock ’em up and throw away the key” approach to criminal justice.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice is asking lawmakers for money to pay for 5,000 new prison beds, including 4,000 in two new maximum security prisons and 1,000 in a medium security prison.

In addition, TDCJ officials have reported that the state’s prison system is understaffed to the tune of 3,200 guards with some prisons operating with only 62 percent of needed staffing.

It has become routine for Texas prison officials to ask lawmakers for more money, more prison space, more guards and more overall staffing every legislative session.

It also has become routine for lawmakers to come up with new and stronger criminal laws demanding extended incarceration each legislative session.

Just the brick-and-mortar portion of the TDCJ request comes to \$400 million.

A new report released last week by the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments said Texas could actually reduce its enormous prison population by 2012 through policy changes.

The report, which was presented to a joint meeting of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee and the House Corrections Committee, called on lawmakers to provide additional prison treatment programs and to parole prisoners according to its parole-release guidelines, which means to stop returning parolees to prison for minor violations.

The 152,000-inmate Texas prison system costs taxpayers \$2.5 billion annually.

By adopting new policies involving treatment and parole, the report’s recommendations would eliminate the need to build new prison facilities while also reducing the system’s overall prison population.

House Corrections Committee Chairman Jerry Madden, R-Plano, sounded a hopeful note for Texas taxpayers who have been repeatedly asked to shell out more money to pay for the mushrooming prison population.

“We’re trying to do some things we believe will change the course of Texas in ways that will make this a better state,” Madden said.

Criminal Justice Committee chairman Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, also supports prison-alternative programs.

Adding more than 6,000 new treatment and rehabilitation beds to cut recidivism rates would cost an estimated \$78 million. But it is estimated that the placement of inmates in less expensive facilities and avoiding new prison construction would save taxpayers more than \$543 million by 2012, according to the Council of State Governments’ Justice Center report.

No one minimizes the state's crime problems. And no one supports the idea that lawmakers go soft on crime.

What lawmakers should do, however, is go smart on crime before the criminal justice system empties the bank accounts of Texas taxpayers.

<http://www.wacotrib.com/opin/content/news/opinion/stories/2007/02/06/02062007wacedit.html>