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## Reforms can safely cut prison population and state costs

The Ryan and Mound correctional facilities, on Detroit's east side, once housed thousands of prisoners bound for lonely, unassisted returns to the city's streets.

But now they're being used as temporary re-entry sites for nearly 2,000 prisoners.

This is one of the cornerstones of the efforts by Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Corrections Director Patricia Caruso to reduce the size of Michigan's prison system.

Inmates get help re-establishing productive lives. They get structure that they often won't find on their own.

Often through video conferencing, prisoners near release meet with parole agents and community housing, employment and other agencies to help line up jobs and places to stay.

They also get classes that work on boosting their coping skills. At a "Thinking for Change" class at Ryan in early December, two MDOC facilitators -- Ronald Irby and Jeffrey Allison -- challenged 20 prisoners to take responsibility and govern thoughts and feelings that could lead them back to crime.

"Prison has your body -- it's up to you not to give it your mind," Irby told one inmate who said prison had turned him into an animal. "If you're looking for a reason to resist change, it's easy to find one."

Inmate Terry Stanfield, 25, of Detroit, told a Free Press editorial writer that attitude determines success, even more than employment. Some inmates, he said, would still rather sell drugs than accept menial work.

"It's about ethics and morality," said Stanfield, who finished a two-year sentence for home invasion and was paroled on Dec. 22. "I used to rationalize what I did."

A small share of parolees will get temporary jobs through Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative contracts with nonprofits such as Motor City Blight Busters, which employs more than 60 parolees for 90 days. Working with electricians, plumbers and carpenters, parolees demolish and rebuild vacant and blighted properties, mostly in northwest Detroit. They learn job skills, secure employment references, and earn \$8 to \$12 an hour. About 25% of them later get permanent jobs with Blight Buster contractors, said President John George.

## Longer prison stays and higher costs

The state will need more of this kind of effort as prison reductions continue.

The state's 36 prisons now hold roughly 46,400 inmates -- the fewest since 2001 -- after peaking at 51,554 in March 2007. Caruso expects the population to fall below 45,000 by year's end.

In the past, longer prison stays had pushed corrections costs higher. Michigan inmates have been serving, on average, 127% of their court-ordered minimum sentences -- well beyond other states that offer parole, reports the Council of State Governments Justice Center. Six years ago, Michigan prisons held an outlandish 17,000 inmates -- more than a third of the population -- who were parole-eligible. Still, a recent study by the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending found no correlation between time served and the likelihood of reoffending.

"Keeping thousands of people locked up longer than was needed for public safety has been a big cause of Michigan's prison growth," said CAPPs Executive Director Barbara Levine.

## Steps to save state money

Granholm and Caruso have gotten the ball rolling, with positive results. Now the Legislature has got to help continue this process, with several steps:

- Restore good-time credits. A House bill would reduce a typical sentence by roughly 15%, lowering Michigan's prison population by 6,000 and saving the department \$107 million a year. It would provide incentives for good behavior and bring Michigan's system in line with the rest of the country. Michigan is one of only a handful of states that haven't adopted federal standards for truth-in-sentencing, making inmates eligible for parole after serving 85% of their sentence.
- Approve new sentencing guidelines to divert hundreds of offenders from prison to lower-cost community corrections programs such as drug courts, electronic tethers, community service and jails. Such programs would save tens of millions of dollars a year, even after reimbursing counties for community-based alternatives.
- Repeal Michigan's notorious juvenile lifer law, which has rightly drawn fire from human rights groups worldwide. The law has forced judges to give kids as young as 14 the maximum adult penalty of life without parole. More than 300 Michigan inmates are serving such sentences. Giving them a shot at parole would likely save millions of dollars.
- Release chronically ill and dying inmates, saving the state millions of dollars a year in health care costs. The commutation and parole process for terminally ill inmates is far too cumbersome. About a dozen terminally ill inmates, recommended for commutations by the governor's Executive Clemency Advisory Council, have died before release. In cases in which inmates have a year or less to live, the state ought to waive requirements for a public hearing.
- Create a temporary and separate parole board to review a backlog of hundreds of parolable lifer cases. In the class-action Kenneth Foster-Bey case, U.S. District Judge Marianne Battani, in 2007, declared that the constitutional rights of more than 1,000 inmates serving life sentences with the possibility of parole have been violated since state parole policies toughened in 1992.
- Ensure that releases and paroles are not delayed because prisoners could not take programs stipulated by the Parole Board, such as the assaultive offenders program. Providing adequate programs is far cheaper than delaying the release of offenders, at a cost to the state of \$35,000 a year each.
- Establish an innocence commission to recommend ways to reduce miscarriages of justice and examine cases of probable wrongful conviction. Wrongful convictions are an especially big problem in Michigan because of the state's abysmal public defender system. Dozens, maybe hundreds, of Michigan inmates have compelling evidence of innocence, without an effective remedy, including Frederick Freeman, Darrell A. Siggers and Darryl Jamual Woods.

There's no one right way to determine the ideal size of the state prison system. In the early 1980s, when crime rates and population were similar to today's, Michigan prisons held fewer than 15,000 people -- less than a third of the current count. Bringing Michigan's incarceration rate down to those of surrounding states would lower the prison population to 35,000.

Either way, creating a cost-effective, safe and humane corrections system that protects the public, sends less-dangerous offenders to community alternatives, treats people with substance abuse and mental health problems, and returns offenders to society with adequate employment and coping skills will take substantial legal and policy changes.

For legislators and a term-limited governor, reforming Michigan's criminal justice system ought to become the centerpiece of restructuring state government this year.

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