

Prison management company fined heavily after U.S. probe could get Michigan deal

By **Kathy Barks Hoffman**
Associated Press

LANSING — A private company that a federal investigation found allowed “a cesspool” of conditions to exist at a Mississippi youth prison and that paid a \$1.1-million fine for understaffing New Mexico prisons could be in line to oversee Michigan inmates in the next year.

The Republican-controlled state Senate has passed legislation that would allow inmates to be moved to a private prison. Legislation awaiting passage in the House would go further, requiring the Department of Corrections to close a prison in Ionia and send more than 1,000 inmates to a private facility if the state can cut its costs by at least 10%.

The bill doesn't specify that any particular company be given the prison contract, but it's unlikely another private company besides GEO Group would bid to house the inmates. The Florida-based company owns

the only private prison in Michigan, the now-empty North Lake Correctional Facility in Baldwin.

Both the state Department of Corrections and Gov. Rick Snyder don't see a need to close the Ionia lockup, especially since the state already has closed 14 prisons or prison camps in the past five years.

The administration is encouraging competitive bidding on services such as providing meals and mental health care to save money and has taken steps to reduce daily costs for housing inmates, including ending random prison perimeter patrols and letting outside companies handle inmates' health care.

But shutting down a state-run prison so the inmates can be sent to a private one isn't something the administration thinks lawmakers should decide.

“It really should be the department and the director's ability to see if that's an option we want to explore, as opposed to a mandate,” Snyder spokeswoman GERALYN LASHER said Fri-

A RARE GUBERNATORIAL VISIT TO JACKSON



Gov. Rick Snyder

Gov. Rick Snyder followed up on a pledge to see how Michigan prisons are being run, becoming the first Michigan governor in more than 50 years to tour a state prison when he visited the Charles E. Egeler Reception and Guidance Center in Jackson on Friday.

Snyder spokeswoman GERALYN LASHER said the last governor to tour a prison was G. Mennen (Soapy) Williams, who served from 1949-60.

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day.

The U.S. Department of Justice released a report in March sharply criticizing the way GEO had run the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility in Mississippi, which housed inmates aged 13 to 22 who were convicted as adults while minors.

The report found that the prison “allowed a cesspool of unconstitutional and inhuman acts and conditions to germinate.” It cited numerous instances where workers had sex with young inmates, beat them, gave favors to those with the same gang affiliations as staff mem-

bers and promoted fights.

In April, GEO pulled out of its contracts to run Walnut Grove and two other Mississippi prisons. Corrections Commissioner Christopher Epps told the Associated Press that there was concern about incidents at all three prisons.

GEO also has paid \$1.1 million in fines to the state of New Mexico for failing to adequately staff one state prison and nearly \$300,000 for problems at another. The company also has come under scrutiny in Florida, where federal investigators are reviewing the circumstances

surrounding development of the state's largest private prison, Blackwater River.

GEO spokesman Pablo Paez said the company can't comment on legislative-related matters. He said the problems at Walnut Creek began before GEO took over the youth prison in late 2010 and his company made “significant” improvements at the prison.

We Are the People, a group that includes labor unions and progressive organizations, filed a Freedom of Information request with the Michigan Department of Corrections this week seeking any correspondence related to GEO, the nation's second-largest private prison company. The group's director, Todd Cook, said the actions by other states raised questions lawmakers should be considering.

“It begs the question, why are they pushing ahead with this?” Cook said. “It's not saving taxpayers money, and it's providing a service that clearly is not where it should be and,

frankly, opens the state up to a potential lawsuit.”

The Baldwin prison was built in 1998 by Wackenhut Corrections as a private lockup for youthful offenders. The state ended the contract in 2005 when it found it could house the youths for less money in state-run prisons. GEO later bought Wackenhut and expanded the prison, winning a contract to house up to 2,600 California prisoners from 2011 to 2015 at a cost of \$60 million a year. The contract fell through when California ran into financial problems.

The House bill that would let the state move inmates to a private prison was sponsored by Republican Rep. Jon Bumstead of Newaygo, whose district includes Baldwin. He received a \$500 campaign donation last year from a GEO executive just before introducing his bill. Rep. Joe Haveman, R-Holland, has pushed language making the move to a private prison mandatory.