

Editorial: Smarter on crime

by Grand Rapids Press Editorial Board

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With Michigan facing yet another budget crisis, Gov. Jennifer Granholm and lawmakers should finally adjust the Department of Corrections operational costs and policies to fit economic reality. Recent measures taken to reduce costs, while helpful, fall short of the bold steps necessary to truly reform this very expensive system.

The state faces an estimated \$265 million budget deficit this fiscal year and a whopping \$1.5 billion deficit next year. Although the exact amount of the revenue gap may change after Friday's revenue estimating conference, a significant deficit will still exist. The anticipated help from a "one-time" federal stimulus of cash should not be used to balance the books and push off tackling structural financial problems. Instead, low hanging fruit such as corrections -- a \$2 billion charge that consumes more than 20 percent of the general fund -- have to be picked. Last month, the closure of two small minimum-security prisons was approved along with the canceling of a training program.

But as Michigan's corrections costs have escalated, numerous proposals to reduce them have been ignored. And calls for *comprehensive* reform have gone nowhere, too. This month the Justice Center at the Council of State Governments is expected to weigh in on steps toward more effective and affordable crime fighting. Certainly, some things already recommended will be cited.

Michigan has more prisoners, incarcerates them longer and spends more to confine them than any other Great Lakes state.

Michigan has some 50,000 prisoners and spends an average of \$34,000 per inmate, the bulk of which is tied to administrative costs. More than a third of all state employees -- over 17,000 people -- work for the Corrections Department. Employee-related costs have also had a major impact on the corrections budget. Not surprisingly, one obstacle to serious reform has been the union, which wields tremendous political power.

In a December letter, 14 state leaders urged action on the prison situation, including the heads of the Grand Rapids Area and Detroit Regional chambers of commerce, the Presidents Council-State Universities of Michigan, Michigan Manufacturers Association and Michigan Municipal League. They insisted inaction will allow costs to grow at a pace that "crowds out strategic

WHY IT MATTERS?

Taxpayers should not continue to be burdened by bloated corrections budgets. Sensible reforms can be made without jeopardizing public safety.

priorities for the state's future." West Michigan legislators should recognize that as well and push for fundamental changes.

Like other states also facing cost pressures, Michigan needs to pursue less expensive but safe alternatives to imprisonment for some nonviolent offenders. In addition, the price tag for providing health care to inmates must be addressed among soaring administrative costs. The parole process, which has seen a decreasing number of prisoners paroled in the last few years, deserves attention along with re-examining sentencing guidelines.

State resources must be targeted to ensure that they are used in addressing the risks and needs of those who pose the greatest threat of re-offending. A pilot project was funded last year that finally steers the mentally ill to treatment instead of prison.

Taxpayers need Gov. Granholm and legislators, who understand the issues involved in transforming the prison system, to show the political will to do what is necessary. Only that will bring meaningful change and cost-savings, in corrections and elsewhere.

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