

Change sought in Florida prison system

A movement among powerful Florida leaders to overhaul the state's prison system is gaining steam as lawmakers grapple with shrinking resources.

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER

Wednesday, June 24, 2009

A call by Florida's most powerful business lobby to halt prison construction and reform the criminal justice system is gaining surprising traction among policymakers in the wake of a deepening budget crisis and growing evidence that building new prison beds will not reduce crime.

Four months after the head of Associated Industries of Florida stunned lawmakers with his plea to slow prison growth, a who's-who of business, religious and political leaders are asking Gov. Charlie Crist to consider alternatives to incarceration for non-violent offenders, particularly drug addicts.

Crist and state lawmakers this week received an "open letter" from opinion-makers calling for a "bold and serious conversation about justice reform."

The statement was signed by three former Florida attorneys general -- Jim Smith, Bob Butterworth and Richard Doran -- along with retired Department of Corrections secretary James McDonough and the heads of the Florida Association of Counties and the Florida Catholic Conference.

"At a time when Florida is in serious recession and facing a deep state budget crisis, the \$2 billion-plus budget of the Florida Department of Corrections has grown larger; and without reform, that budget will continue to grow at a pace that crowds out other mission-critical state services such as education, human service needs, and environmental protection," the group wrote.

Calling itself the Coalition for Smart Justice, the group is asking state leaders to bolster education, drug and alcohol treatment and faith-based and character-building programs both within the state prison system and in community settings as an alternative to prison. Coalition members also want Crist to "immediately implement" a bill passed by the Legislature in 2008 that created "the much needed" Correctional Policy Advisory Council to offer new directions for criminal justice administration.

Staying the course, coalition members wrote, will lead to "too many non-violent individuals being incarcerated, too many prisons needing to be built at astounding public cost [and] too many young people moving from the juvenile justice system into the adult justice system."

BREAKING CYCLE

At the root of the state's failures, the group says, is the unwillingness of lawmakers to invest in programs -- such as job training, education and substance-abuse treatment -- that can break the cycle of crime and reduce recidivism.

McDonough, the state's former drug czar and prisons chief, said Florida can avoid the need to build a new \$100 million prison each year by spending one-fifth that amount on drug treatment. "The math is irrefutable," McDonough said. ``That's \$100 million right there that you don't have to spend immediately."

Gretl Plessinger, DOC's spokeswoman, said the equation is far more complicated. Since the prison system runs on a five-year cycle based on "strategic projections," the corrections agency cannot simply ``stop construction on a dime."

"Several projects are nearing completion," Plessinger said. ``We've already spent money, and to stop construction now would cost taxpayers quite a lot of money."

DOC Secretary Walter McNeil does not favor the early release of inmates, Plessinger said, but does agree with the coalition's goal of increased spending on drug treatment and other programs designed to aid offenders' safe return to their communities. Close to 90 percent of state inmates eventually are released, she said.