

Alaskans voice concern about comprehensive crime reform bill at hearing

Jerzy Shedlock, Alaska Dispatch News

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A victim rights advocate and two police officers expressed concern at a hearing last week that criminals would be protected and the public ignored by a justice reform bill moving through the Alaska Legislature. During a Senate State Affairs Committee hearing Thursday, Taylor Winston, the director of [Alaska's Office of Victims' Rights](#), said she believed many aspects of Senate Bill 91 are unconstitutional because they do not protect victims of crime.

Two Anchorage police officers said they had similar concerns. Anchorage Police Department Employees Association, the police union, said in written testimony that it also opposed the omnibus reform bill.

The bill emerged from a [set of recommendations](#) issued by the Alaska Criminal Justice Commission in December.

The commission said the reforms would reduce the prison population and save \$424 million over the next decade.

Those recommendations included re-evaluating pretrial practices, locking up serious and violent offenders, strengthening parole and probation to keep Alaskans from re-offending, and giving crime victims a greater priority in the law.

Sen. John Coghill, R-North Pole and the vice chairman of the commission, placed some of the recommendations in SB 91, which he introduced.

Alaska's politicians and members of the justice commission have lauded the work done so far, but they acknowledged that changes in the way justice works statewide is a long way off.

The commission is continuing its data-driven work, holding [weekly meetings in Anchorage](#).

Winston touched on a number of issues the Office of Victims' Rights uncovered.

She said reductions to bail and sentencing laws, practices governing the time served before inmates are eligible for parole and more lenient criminal penalties for certain crimes may prolong victims' suffering.

For example, she said the bill -- and the justice system in general -- doesn't fully consider the victims of property crimes.

In those cases, victims are often treated like "the forgotten stepchild," Winston said.

The reforms call for expanding the use of citations in place of arrests for low-level, nonviolent offenses, which include many property crimes.

She also noted the changes for some misdemeanor drug crimes, which would be reduced to citations.

Anchorage Police Department officer Charles Baker also testified about property crimes and drug offenses.

He said he was concerned about a section of the bill that increases the threshold for drug arrests.

Baker argued that if someone were selling drugs near a school, he couldn't arrest that person unless they possessed over 2 1/2 grams of drugs.

"All I'm allowed to do (under SB 91) is give them a summons, a piece of paper," the officer said. "Not take them to jail."

"We need to get (the dealers) away from the victims. That's the best thing," he said.

"I can possibly arrest them for trespass after the second or third citation. But a guy could accumulate 100 pieces of paper. We shouldn't be making more victims. We should be tough on crime."

Anchorage officer Jeremy Conkling, vice president of the Anchorage Police Department Employees Association, said later in the hearing that those changes and others take the teeth out of police tools used to combat crime.

Conkling argued that the more that officers are restricted, the more emboldened criminals are going to be. Current penalties don't offer enough deterrence, he said, adding that weaker laws would exacerbate the problem.

Coghill said the bill before the Legislature likely will change in dramatic ways before it's passed.

Despite the opposition of the officials testifying, the goals of law enforcement, state agencies and lawmakers line up, he said.

"The methods about how we go about it may differ, but the intent to protect the public and keep offenders accountable is important," Coghill said.

Lawmakers could address some of the concerns later, the senator said.

State Affairs Committee Chairman Bill Stoltze, R-Chugiak, said testimony made it sound like the constitutionality of the reforms weren't fleshed out.

He called on John Skidmore, head of the Department of Law's Criminal Division, to ask if that department found constitutional issues in its review. Skidmore said the law department did not see any, but after hearing Winston's testimony, he would want to work with Office of Victims' Rights to see if there were. Another hearing on the bill is set for Feb. 25.

Alaska prisons department says it needs over 100 more employees

Megan Edge, Alaska Dispatch News
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In a new report, Alaska's Department of Corrections says it needs more than 100 additional employees to keep up with current programs, security and operational requirements, but it doesn't have the personnel budget to back it.

DOC released the 223-page staffing analysis Thursday evening. The report highlighted major issues and recommendations to mend the staffing shortage gap.

"Our analysis indicated that a number of the facilities are currently operating with staffing levels insufficient to meet basic security operational requirements," the report stated.

According to the report, in the short term DOC needs at least 1,977 employees to properly function within the requirements of the professional correctional standards and practices. DOC would need to increase staffing by 5.4 percent, or 102 employees.

Fifty-seven percent of the recommended short-term staffing increase would be to provide relief staff to corrections officers, which is not currently budgeted, the report states. The rest would be to ensure adequate health care at various facilities around the state.

Long-term recommendations suggested DOC needs 144 additional employees, for a total of 2,019 employees. The report said although it is a larger number, it should be DOC's operating standard, but that's even further above DOC's current budget.

The report breaks down some of the biggest issues caused by the staffing shortage using data collected through document review, inspections and staff interviews. [The analysis was conducted by CGL, the same company that conducted the performance review of DOC in 2014.](#)

The new report says the staffing shortage results in overtime pay, vacancies from other posts, unqualified personnel filling positions and lack of required training.

In a statement, DOC Commissioner Dean Williams, [who was appointed in late January](#), said he would take the next several weeks to review and digest the information provided in the analysis. He said in coming months he'd meet with unions to further discuss the report and possible changes.

Transitional program for former inmates aims to reduce recidivism in Alaska

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ANCHORAGE - Since June of last year, an Anchorage program has been helping released inmates successfully re-enter their communities and avoid going back behind bars.

Solutions Project co-founder Donteh DeVoe said the program provides a "Healing House" in East Anchorage where former inmates can go after being released from prison. There, they learn to care for the house they live in until they can get back on their feet.

A former inmate himself, DeVoe said the idea for the program came after he was released from prison a few years ago.

"After getting released in October 2013, I was sent to the halfway house and then I myself lived in a transitional living home," DeVoe said. "While I lived in the transitional living home, I understood that the relatability factor as a person coming out of incarceration was kind of missing at the time."

DeVoe said the goal was to create an environment in a home setting that provides structure, balancing authority with friendship. As many as five returning citizens can live in the house from six months to a year, learning life and social skills.

DeVoe said the program also provides assistance with finding a job as well as drug and alcohol treatment resources. The whole goal is to provide a positive environment that encourages former prison inmates to achieve success and reduce recidivism in the state, DeVoe said.

"We've had 18 community members, returning citizens come through here since opening in June," DeVoe said. "Out of that 18, 17 have gone on to be successful, we've only had 1 recidivate and so that's about a 91 percent success rate and we're very proud of that."

Micheal Dorris, a former prison inmate who served 666 days in jail for felony theft charges was the first returning citizen to participate in the Solutions Project.

"Getting released is stressful, there's a lot of excitement about being released, there's a lot of anxiety that comes with it not knowing where you're gonna go in the community," Dorris said. "What you're going to do, how you're gonna take care of yourself and it's difficult to plan when you're in an institution because you can't contact all the resources, everything is done by mail."

Through his stay at the Healing House, Dorris said he was able to return to his previous job as a front desk manager in sales and marketing for Alex Hotel, a job he held before he went to prison.

"Getting out as a felon you're vulnerable, you're not sure how to proceed. So being able to have these kind of programs is really beneficial for people in my situation and others," Dorris said.

While The Healing House is only for male prison inmates transitioning back into their communities, DeVoe said he hopes to open another house for females near the end of the year.