

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Crime & Courts

Legislators say they fear repeat of ‘criminal college’ with state’s plan to ship Alaska inmates Outside

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Spring Creek Correctional Center, Seward, Alaska, Aug. 12, 2016. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

A day after the Alaska Department of Corrections announced plans to send hundreds of Alaska inmates to Outside prisons, legislators and those familiar with the state prison system said the department needs to preserve rehabilitation options or abandon the project entirely.

Many said they fear a repeat of history. The state of Alaska sent prisoners Outside until data showed most inmates committed new crimes upon their release, causing the system to be dubbed “criminal college.”

Exact details of the state's plan will be revealed next week when the state begins soliciting proposals.

"We need to see whether or not we are going to be able to offer better services," said Rep. Tammie Wilson, R-North Pole. "Or are we going to look at what happened to us just before we started bringing inmates back home?"

Earlier this year, federal prosecutors indicted members of a white supremacist gang that arrived in the state in 2010 when Alaska inmates returned from Outside prisons. That experience, repeated many times over, prompted the state to build Goose Creek Correctional Center and stop sending inmates out of the state.

"They've come back hardened criminals. We know that because that's happened every single time," said Sen. Scott Kawasaki, D-Fairbanks, and a member of the Senate subcommittee in charge of the prison budget.

Sid Atwood, spouse of former Rep. Sharon Cissna, D-Anchorage, was a member of the state's advisory board on alcoholism and drug abuse until he and several other members — including the Department of Corrections chaplain — were removed from the board late last month, something he links to the prison decision.

"They said they were going a different direction," he said.

Atwood volunteers at prisons, helping inmates prepare to re-enter society. In his experience, sending inmates Outside denies them contact with their families and encourages them to seek other connections, such as a gang.

"The fact that you can't go and visit your loved one who made a mistake is one of the reasons why that person learns more about supposedly how to do it better next time, when they get out," he said.

During the legislative session, lawmakers said they preferred the state reopen Palmer Correctional Center rather than send inmates Outside. That prison was closed after criminal justice reforms caused Alaska's prison population to drop. Now that the reforms have been repealed, the state's prison population is rebounding.

Wilson was among lawmakers who encouraged electronic monitoring and halfway houses as a first option for incarceration. After that, lawmakers indicated the state should use existing prisons, then reopen Palmer, and only after that consider sending inmates away.

The state capital budget includes \$16.7 million for reopening the Palmer prison and does not specifically allocate money for sending prisoners Outside.

Rep. Matt Claman, D-Anchorage, said that clearly indicates the Legislature preferred to open the Palmer prison first.

On Tuesday, Department of Corrections Commissioner Nancy Dahlstrom said reopening the prison would require at least a year and the hiring of 70 new employees. The department offered additional details Wednesday, saying things like security equipment and fire sprinkler piping need to be repaired, replaced or upgraded.

The Alaska Correctional Officers Association, in a written statement, faulted the Dunleavy administration for not hiring more corrections officers.

The ACOA, the state's union for prison guards, said there are 30 fewer corrections officers today than there were at the start of Dunleavy's term. In an interview on KSRM-AM radio Wednesday afternoon, Dahlstrom said her department has 85 vacant positions in addition to the 70 that would be needed to reopen the Palmer prison.

According to a Thursday letter from union president Randy McLellan to the governor, the state intends to fill the 85 vacancies, and McLellan encouraged the governor to use those to reopen the Palmer prison by stages.

"Sir, I cannot tell you in strong enough terms that your administration's inaction over the past months in regard to hiring correctional officers and your decision to utilize private prisons runs counter to your public safety agenda," McLellan wrote.

Rep. George Rauscher, R-Sutton, represents the House district that includes the Palmer prison.

He said the state's prisons have reached "maximum prisoner overload" and believes the Department of Corrections will use "temperance" when deciding who to send out of state.

"My concern is, what does the state of Alaska's rehabilitation program actually look like? Shouldn't PCC be a part of it?" he said.

Sen. Shelley Hughes, R-Palmer, said she is concerned by the idea of sending inmates outside, but the state could alleviate those concerns by taking requiring rehabilitation programs and re-entry systems. She has suggested returning inmates to Alaska for a period before their release.

It is unclear how the state will pay for sending prisoners Outside.

When asked, a Department of Corrections spokeswoman wrote by email that it would come from the "population management" line of the budget rather than money intended to reopen Palmer, which lawmakers said cannot be transferred.

"If that's the case," Claman said of the department's plan, "then they'll need to come back for a supplemental budget request."

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About this Author

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Comments