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News-Miner Editorial

## Sending our inmates Outside?: Keeping them here at home may be best in the long run

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News-Miner opinion: Alaska sent its first load of inmates to a privately run prison in the Lower 48 nearly 25 years ago and is preparing to resume the practice under a proposal by the administration of Gov. Mike Dunleavy to alleviate crowding in the state's correctional facilities.

It would mark a return to a system that Alaska abandoned in 2012, when it started bringing home its prisoners from Outside.

It's a complicated subject, one in which there are competing matters of the safety of corrections officers and inmates, the potential cost savings of sending inmates Outside and the potential rehabilitative value of keeping those inmates here in Alaska, where they will be closer to family and friends.

The state Department of Corrections on Oct. 22 put out a request for proposals to house up to 500 adult male prisoners, with a possible increase to 750 prisoners, in a "facility or facilities to be provided by the contractor." The bid documents don't specifically state the prisoners need to be housed outside of Alaska, but Alaska has no private prisons.

Some legislators are irritated by the decision of the department, headed by Commissioner Nancy Dahlstrom, to move ahead with the proposal rather than to reopen the Palmer Correctional Center, which the department closed in 2016 under former Gov. Bill Walker in a budget-cutting move. Inmates at that facility, which held minimum and medium security prisoners, were shifted to other Alaska facilities.

Those legislators might be right to be irritated. That's because the Legislature wanted the Palmer prison reopened and provided \$17 million in the current year's budget to do just that.

Interestingly, the Palmer prison held about 500 prisoners, roughly the same number that the state now wants to send Outside to a private prison.

So why not reopen the Palmer prison as the Legislature desired? It is sitting there with its power, heat and lights still on. That would explain the \$350,200 allocation to the prison in the state's operating budget, a small fraction of the \$10.6 million it cost to operate it at the time of its closure in 2016. About half of that total cost was reallocated to other correctional institutions to increase staffing as prisoners from Palmer were transferred around.

Commissioner Dahlstrom, in an Oct. 15 letter to legislators, stated it would take too long — “at least 12 months” — to reopen the Palmer prison, require the hiring of an additional 70 correctional officers, and that the situation in the prison system had become dire following the governor's signing in July of legislation re-tightening the state's criminal justice system.

Everyone involved knew months ago that the governor was going to sign that bill and that it would result in the addition of a projected 728 inmates in the state's prisoner population this year, adding to a system that was already at 97% capacity.

The governor signed the crime bill July 11 — the same day he signed budget legislation that included the money to reopen the Palmer prison.

So should the state have moved quickly to reopen the Palmer prison instead of waiting three months to put out a request for proposals to transfer inmates to a private prison, according to the bid documents, by February of 2020? That's a question that legislators would be right to ask.

Legislators already have concerns.

Nearly two dozen House members, including Republican Reps. Steve Thompson and Bart LeBon and Democratic Reps. Adam Wool and Grier Hopkins, all of Fairbanks, signed an Oct. 23 letter to Commissioner Dahlstrom critical of the effort to send inmates Outside. The letter points out that the House “soundly rejected appropriating money for out-of-state incarceration in private prisons by a bipartisan vote of 29-to-6, based in part on the failure of the administration to offer a plausible justification for it,” specifically regarding the amount of time it would take to reopen and staff the facility.

On a legal front, the letter questions the legality of the department's decision, calling it a “violation of the Legislature's appropriation authority.

But what about the inmates themselves and about Alaska?

“All evidence suggests incarcerating Alaskans in the Lower 48 not only tears apart families and communities, but it can also create more sophisticated criminals who will eventually return to Alaska,” the letter from House members reads. “In 2012, Alaska began bringing out-of-state prisoners home. Much of the increased gang activity and violent crime has been directly attributed to Alaskans who spent time incarcerated outside.”

If that's correct, is it really smart for Alaska to be sending our prisoners Outside? It doesn't seem so. Sending them to the Lower 48 might save money now but at what cost later?