



MIDLANDS

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Act on prison crowding or pay, state panel told

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 WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

LINCOLN — State leaders got a price estimate Wednesday if they do nothing about Nebraska's increasingly overcrowded prisons: \$499 million.

The estimate, which covers the cost of handling the state's current and projected overcrowding over the next

10 years, inspired some skepticism. But it also provided a glimpse at the gravity of the problems facing a 19-member working group charged with easing the deluge of inmates.

"This is a very serious and important issue that I think we all want to handle," said Gov. Dave Heineman, one of three co-chairmen of the Justice Reinvestment Working Group.

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Reporter Todd Cooper discusses the revelation that dozens of Nebraska prisoners were mistakenly released early.

At the panel's first meeting Wednesday, members received an earful of statistics about how Nebraska's prison system has become so overcrowded.

Marc Pelka of the Council of State Governments' Justice Center provided preliminary data about the state's correctional system and outlined a handful of questions that the information raises.

The Justice Center has helped 20 other states devise "justice reinvestment" strategies to reduce repeat crimes, lower prison populations and

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decrease corrections spending by employing less costly but more effective alternatives to incarceration.

As of May 31, state prisons held 5,175 inmates. That is 58 percent over their design capacity of 3,275. The state has converted more cells to double bunks, uses temporary cots for dozens of inmates and is considering shipping some state inmates to county jails.

Overcrowding is projected to grow by an additional 598 inmates over the next decade, raising operating costs by \$149 million. An additional 2,200 new prison beds would be needed to accommodate prisoners, at a cost of \$350 million, according to CSG.

The governor questioned the projection, saying he doubted the prison population would continue to rise at its recent

pace — a 12 percent increase in the past two years.

State Sen. Brad Ashford of Omaha said juvenile justice and prison reform laws passed in the past two sessions have not had enough of a chance to cut into overcrowding, including a \$14.4 million investment this year in expanding alternatives to prison and improving rehabilitation programs.

The CSG Justice Center was asked to consider the impact of recent legislation and bring a new cost estimate to the group's next meeting, Aug. 26.

Among the organization's preliminary data:

» From 2002 through 2012, reported violent and property crimes in Nebraska decreased by 24 percent and arrests dropped by 17 percent.

» Spending on state prisons increased by 34 percent in

that period, and the number of inmates rose 20 percent.

» Felony criminal case filings have increased by 19 percent in recent years. Only 13 percent of those cases ended with probation, while 76 percent led to more expensive jail or prison terms. The probation percentage is relatively low compared with other states.

» The average length of prison sentences is four to six years but appears to be growing longer, exacerbating overcrowding.

» Most new admissions to prison, 61 percent, have minimum sentences of two years or less, suggesting that alternatives could be found.

Heineman said he wants to know why the prison population continues to grow even though the state's crime rate is falling.

Violent criminals need to be

behind bars, he said, but perhaps there are more cost-effective ways to deal with low-risk inmates.

The CSG group was invited by the Legislature, the courts and the governor to advise the state on the overcrowding problem and issues that arose after a series of violent incidents linked to released inmates.

The worst involved was Nikko Jenkins, who killed four people in Omaha shortly after completing his prison sentence last summer. Another committee formed by the Legislature is probing the handling of Jenkins by the state prison system.

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