



State Sen. McCoy joins call to change good-time rules

By PAUL HAMMEL
 WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

LINCOLN — State Sen. Beau McCoy of Omaha, a Republican candidate for governor, has joined the chorus of officials seeking changes in the state's good-time laws.

Gov. Dave Heineman and Attorney General Jon Bruning have been among the officials condemning the practice of "automatic" good time in prison for hardened criminals, and have said such inmates should earn it.

Two weeks ago, Chuck Hassebrook, a Democratic candidate for governor, also called for changes in good-time laws.

McCoy said Wednesday that he's drafting a bill that would require violent offenders to "earn" good-time reductions in their sentences, through good behavior and participation in rehabilitation programs.

"We cannot let four lives be lost in vain," McCoy said.

He was referring to four slayings in Omaha in August linked to Nikko Jenkins, who was released from prison on July 30.

Jenkins' case raised the issue of good time because while he lost some good time due to assaults he committed while in prison, he could have been docked 9½ more months if prison officials had opted for the maximum penalties allowed.

Currently, state law awards one day of good time for every day spent in prison, effectively cutting an inmate's sentence in half. Prison officials can take good time away for misconduct, but a World-Herald analysis indicated that is done in less than 5 percent of the reported incidents of inmate misconduct.

McCoy, who said he's still working out the details of his

bill, said that inmates now don't have an incentive to attend classes on anger management and addictions to drugs and alcohol. Making them earn good time by attending such classes, he said, would make the public safer.

"So if they do re-enter society, it's a safe re-entry," the lawmaker said.

His press release on Wednesday came two days after the Department of Correctional Services proposed changing state regulations so that twice as much good time could be taken away for assaults and other misconduct by inmates. McCoy said he supports that, but a new state law is also needed.

Standing in the way will be Omaha Sen. Ernie Chambers, who pledged Tuesday to fight any "knee-jerk" changes in the state's current good-time law, which he authored in 1992.

"One bad case is not a basis for changing the entire system," Chambers said, calling the department's proposal "totally irresponsible and not well thought out."

He called Jenkins an isolated case in which the prison system failed, not the rules.

Jenkins spent about 60 percent of his prison sentence in solitary confinement, where he received no mental-health or re-entry counseling and was allowed out for only one hour per day to go to a small exercise pen, Marshall Lux, state ombudsman, has said.

Chambers said if Jenkins had been kept in prison longer, under those circumstances, "he might have come out and done worse things."

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