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NEBRASKA PRISONS

# Price tag put on easing crowding

About \$25 million could fill the gaps in the state's system, state senators say.

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WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

LINCOLN — A \$20 million to \$25 million price tag was placed

Friday on an effort to address the state's prison problems, which include chronic overcrowding and a string of deadly incidents involving released prison inmates.

Two state senators said the expense was preferable to building a new \$150 million state prison.

Omaha Sens. Brad Ashford and Heath Mello also said

other states have shown that "reinvesting" in alternatives to incarceration and focusing more money on the most violent offenders can save tax dollars and make society safer.

"If we don't make the correct fiscal policy choices, it may cost

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## Prison: Law enforcement officials want inmates to earn good time

us 10 times more," said Mello, chairman of the budget-writing Appropriations Committee.

Ashford, the Judiciary Committee chairman, hosted Friday's meeting of about 40 state and local criminal justice officials to address prison issues.

Two Omaha police officials were among those attending. They asked lawmakers to focus more attention on violent, repeat offenders and to require that such inmates earn any "good time" reductions in their sentences.

Nebraska prisons in recent months have been at around 150 percent of their capacity, holding about 1,600 more inmates than they were designed for. Cells have been double-bunked, and inmates have slept on floor mats to handle the overcrowding.

Prison inmates also have been involved in a string of violent incidents over the past year.

Those include a work release inmate with a record of drunk-driving offenses who drove

a state van nearly head-on into a Lincoln woman's vehicle, killing her. A year ago, while on a weekend furlough, an inmate with a gang history was shot and killed by Omaha police who said he lunged for a handgun.

Last month, Nikko Jenkins, a former prison inmate who has claimed he is mentally ill, was charged with first-degree murder counts in four slayings in Omaha, occurring just days after he completed his sentence.

State Corrections Director Bob Houston retired abruptly amid questions about the incidents. An Omaha prison warden, Michael Kenney, was named as his replacement.

At Friday's meeting at the State Capitol, those in attendance said there were several "gaps" in the current corrections system. Those include:

» Inadequate education and counseling programs to prepare inmates for re-entry into society. About 80 percent of prison inmates are released within three years. But officials said that anger management, sex-offender and violence reduction programming is limited, and

supervised work-release programs have been shortened.

» A lack of in-prison and after-prison treatment for mentally ill convicts. Houston opened a 60-bed mental health unit at the Lincoln Correctional Center, but that isn't enough, according to State Ombudsman Marshall Lux. Once an inmate gets out, there is no follow-up to make sure medications are taken and treatments are followed.

» Not enough probation and parole officers to supervise nonviolent inmates who might be better, and less expensively, handled outside prison walls. Alternatives such as drug courts and intense probation supervision programs are at capacity or above.

Sarpy County Sheriff's Capt. Dan Williamson estimated that 35 percent of the inmates in County Jail have mental health problems, but there are few treatment options.

"I'm totally surprised we don't have more suicides in jail. We don't have the treatment," he said.

Ashford said the Legislature may need to spend up to

\$25 million next year to tackle the multiple issues facing the state prison system. Mello put the figure at about \$20 million, which he said could come from \$53 million in cash reserves set aside by the Legislature this spring.

"This is a real battle," Ashford said. "We have to reinvest dollars in our prison system now."

Omaha Police Chief Todd Schmaderer said his department is most concerned about repeat violent offenders, who account for perhaps 10 percent of the city's crimes.

He said that such offenders need to stay longer in prison, and get better re-entry programs, before they are released.

That was an issue in the Jenkins case. He committed four assaults while in prison, but he didn't lose a substantial amount of good time. He also spent about 60 percent of his sentence in segregation, and inmates don't get any re-entry programming in the isolated cells, Lux said.

Sgt. John Wells, president of

the Omaha police union, said violent criminals like Jenkins should be required to earn good time by participating in prison rehabilitation programs. He said the current good time law doesn't make sense.

Gov. Dave Heineman has also called for "earned" good time instead of automatic good time.

Under current law, inmates are awarded one day of good time for every day spent in prison, effectively cutting their sentences in half. Prison officials can take away good time for violations of prison rules, but that rarely happens, according to a World-Herald analysis of state data.

Heineman's representatives, from his Policy Research Office and from the Department of Correctional Services and the Crime Commission, did not attend the meeting. The governor, earlier this week, cited conflicts with other duties.

He said he planned to be engaged in the prison debate and remained committed to seeking alternatives to building a new prison.

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