



MIDLANDS

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'JUSTICE REINVESTMENT'

Prison reform panel gets to work

Study by national group to suggest alternatives to help cut inmate numbers

By PAUL HAMMEL
WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

LINCOLN — A national organization that has helped 19 other states cut prison spending and reduce repeat crimes by investing in alternatives to imprisonment officially began its work Wednesday in Nebraska.

State leaders asked the Council of State Governments' Justice Center to study Nebraska's corrections system

in light of chronic overcrowding of prisons and a string of deadly incidents that involved recently released inmates.

The most tragic involved Nikko Jenkins, a mentally troubled inmate who killed four people in the Omaha area last summer, shortly after completing his prison sentence — a sentence spent mostly in a segregation cell and one that ended with little preparation for his return to society.

Gov. Dave Heineman joined Council of State Governments officials at a press conference Wednesday morning, before the first meeting of the 19-member Nebraska Justice Reinvestment Working Group, which will work with the CSG's Justice Center. That committee's co-chairmen will be the governor, Chief Justice Mike Heavican of the Nebraska Supreme Court and State Sen. Greg Adams, speaker of the Leg-

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islatore, who also attended the press conference.

One often-mentioned goal of the prison reform study: to avoid having to spend \$150 million to build new prison cells.

"We are looking for innovative and sensible solutions to our prison challenges," Heineman said. "I am hopeful that we can develop cost-effective policies that will create a responsible, long-term prison strategy and increase public safety."

Heineman said he's hopeful the study will develop "viable options" for judges besides sending criminals to prison. Right now, he said, alternatives such as drug courts and intensely supervised probation don't exist in every corner of the state.

Judges, he said, need to be "comfortable" that such alternatives are not only available but also effective and well-run.

The CSG Justice Center is scheduled to issue a report by January, which will "chart the course" on how state corrections policies should be reformed, said Omaha Sen. Brad Ashford, one of the state lawmakers who led the push to invite the CSG to Nebraska.

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said Ashford, chairman of the Legislature's Judiciary Committee and a Democratic candidate for U.S. Congress in Omaha's 2nd District.

The approach is called "justice reinvestment" because it seeks to redirect corrections spending from programs that aren't reducing crime or improving public safety toward programs that have been proven to work, using data analysis and the experiences of other states.

Marc Pelka, program director for the Justice Center, said his group is coming to Nebraska because of the "bipartisan commitment" shown by state leaders to use research to address the growth in prison populations and spending.

The Justice Center has helped 19 other states launch justice reinvestment programs and is completing work in Idaho this spring. Work will begin in the 21st state, Washington, next week.

Last week, the CSG reported that eight states, via justice reinvestment projects, had reduced the number of inmates returned

to prison for repeat crimes by 5.8 percent, to 19.3 percent. Those states also saw reductions in crime rates and prison populations.

Neighboring Colorado, for example, reduced its inmate population from 22,519 in 2007 to 20,134 in 2013 by investing in more community-based treatment programs for drug offenders, by promoting efforts to better transition inmates from prison and by providing incentives for inmates to participate in rehabilitation programs.

Those numbers contrast with Nebraska, which has seen its prison populations steadily rise, from 4,424 in 2009 to 5,175 as of May 31. That puts state prisons at 158 percent of capacity — above the 140-percent threshold at which a governor can declare a prison emergency.

Heineman has declined to do so, insisting that state prison officials can manage the overcrowding. He also has held firm in his conviction that Nebraska can avoid the \$100-million-plus expense of building new prisons by adopting alternatives for low-

risk offenders.

This spring, the Legislature passed a law to start some prison-reform efforts, including enhanced job training and mental health treatment in prison. It also set up the panel to work with the CSG.

The CSG is a nonprofit association that helps state, local and federal government agencies. It charges dues to members. Its Justice Center relies on grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the U.S. Department of Justice to finance prison reform studies, which average about \$350,000 to \$500,000 per state and take two years.

The CSG study is also expected to explore a prison-related problem revealed Sunday by The World-Herald: the early release of dozens of violent criminals after the state miscalculated their sentences.

Two other studies of state prison policies were authorized by the Nebraska Legislature. One is focusing on the case of Jenkins and whether prison policies and practices contributed to his rampage. The other, by the Legislative Performance Audit Committee, has not yet adopted goals.

Contact the writer:
402-473-9584, paul.hammel@owh.com