

Opinion

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Pa.'s prison juggernaut

By Dan Berger and Hannah Zellman

Gov. Corbett has a prison problem.

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On the governor's watch, the state has engaged in a massive, \$685 million expansion of its prison system. In his short time as governor, Corbett has overseen the completion of a new, \$200-million, 2,000-bed prison in Centre County, which currently sits empty - perhaps because the state does not need it and cannot afford to staff it. And last summer, the administration began construction on two new state prisons on the grounds of Montgomery County's Graterford prison, which will house at least 4,100 and cost \$400 million to build.

The problem is that Pennsylvanians don't want, don't need, and can't afford expensive new prisons. And these prisons are being built while Corbett, having portrayed himself as a fiscal conservative, slashes funding for education, general assistance, and health care. That may be why Corbett has responded with misrepresentations when confronted about his support for this latest round of prison system expansion, which was begun under former Gov. Ed Rendell.

Last week, members of Decarcerate PA and other community groups publicly confronted the governor about the \$400 million prison construction project in Skippack, Montgomery County. In response to the protests, which eventually shut down a town-hall meeting at the Philadelphia Museum of Art last month, Corbett said, "Not only have I not added new prisons; I've stopped the building of prisons."

Corbett seems to think that if he simply refuses to acknowledge the \$200 million prison project in Benner Township, Centre County - which had just begun when he took office, and which he certainly has the power to cancel - nobody will notice it's there. Likewise, his administration has just broken ground on construction of the two new prisons in Skippack.

Corbett's Department of Corrections secretary, John Wetzel, would have us believe that these facilities will simply replace the existing Graterford prison. Yet the department has not commissioned an independent study to determine whether the existing facility can be renovated rather than replaced. On a recent appearance on WHYY-FM's *Radio Times*, Wetzel suggested that such renovations could be done for \$50 million - much less than the \$400 million being spent ostensibly to "replace" Graterford.

Wrong direction

This massive expansion of Pennsylvania's prison system - which has grown from about 8,000 prisoners in 1980 to more than 51,000 today - comes at a time when neighboring states are decreasing their prison populations and closing old, unused prisons without replacing them.

In 2009, the national prison population declined for the first time in almost 40 years. Yet Pennsylvania led the country in the opposite direction, adding more prisoners than any other state.

The governor has touted Senate Bill 100, the criminal justice reform legislation he signed into law last summer, as a step toward decreasing the state's prison population. But Pennsylvania will need much bolder action to replicate the successes of states like New York, where the prison population has decreased by more than 10,000 over the last decade.

Less crime

New York reduced its prison population by taking significant steps to revise its draconian mandatory minimum sentencing laws. To address the role of longer sentences in driving prison population growth, several states have also looked to early release. Mississippi is allowing prisoners with certain drug felony charges to serve shorter portions of their sentences before being considered for parole. Illinois, Oregon, and Nevada are increasing the use of good time and earned time, providing prisoners credit toward completion of their sentences for participation in corrections programs.

Contrary to common fears about the impact these measures will have on public safety, crime rates have steadily decreased in at least four states that have reduced their reliance on incarceration: New Jersey, New York, Michigan, and Kansas.

Pennsylvania does not need 4,100 new prison beds in Montgomery County. We need fully funded public schools, support for last-resort social safety nets like general assistance, and access to quality housing and health care. And we need real sentencing reform that will end our addiction to incarceration for good instead of just tweaking the problem at the edges.

The governor can start by canceling the prison project in Montgomery County today. We invite him to make good on what he told his audience in Philadelphia recently: Stop building prisons, and start working with Pennsylvanians to build safe, sustainable communities instead. If Gov. Corbett wants us to believe that he is not building prisons, all he needs to do is stop building prisons.

Dan Berger and Hannah Zellman are members of Decarcerate PA, which is working to end mass incarceration in Pennsylvania.

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