



Prison overcrowding back on agenda

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Isadora Vail
Express-News Austin Bureau

AUSTIN — Ten years after Texas legislators went on a prison-building binge to ease overcrowding, the issue is back — a big sign that something bigger is wrong with the corrections system and needs to be fixed, criminal justice groups said Wednesday.

The House Committee on Corrections heard testimony from more than 10 organizations, including the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, to gather ideas and discuss ways to alleviate overcrowding in the state's prison system.

Texas had to reduce the overflow of prisoners in the 1990s because of a federal court order, nearly tripling the number of inmate beds. With more than 150,000 beds, it is considered the largest prison system in the country.

Since prison overcrowding is nothing new and Gov. Rick Perry vetoed a probation reduction bill last year, the committee is seeking alternatives to incarceration by reducing a felon's chances of reoffending.

But that doesn't mean a similar probation bill won't cross the governor's desk again next year, said Shannon Edmonds, staff attorney for Texas District and County Attorneys Association. Edmonds said the committee hopes to form a product that everyone will support.

House Bill 2193 would have reduced the maximum probation period from 10 to five years for some felons. Lawmakers overwhelmingly passed the bill, but Perry rejected it because some felons were violent offenders.

According to the TDCJ, Texas had the largest probation population in the country in 2004.

"Today Texans are bearing a huge, unnecessary cost due to a failed probation system," testified Ana Yañez-Correa, executive director of the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. "Many Texans would be shocked to know that bad probation policies in our state are only serving to waste tax dollars while actually diminishing public safety."

Other ways to alleviate prison overcrowding were discussed by Texas Youth Commission, Probation Advisory Council and the Texas Probation Association.

Jim Scott, the legislative co-chairman for the Texas Probation Association, said he is gathering probation officers' opinions about the criminal justice system and where they believe the corrections system should be.

Richard Watkins, with the NAACP, spoke of his years spent as a Texas prison guard. He experienced many changes with inmates through faith-based and substance abuse programs, and that these programs should still be available to inmates.

Committee member John McReynolds said the committee needs help in finding a way back to where the criminal justice system was a few years ago, when college courses were offered in prisons. "We need help to develop a map of where we were a few years ago," McReynolds said.

http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/crime/stories/MYSA032306.02B.prison_crowding.d6df692.html