

## Time to fix Alaska's prisons: Governor, Legislature should move swiftly to adopt reforms

### Fairbanks Daily News-Miner editorial

Dec 15, 2015

**News-Miner opinion:** The state of Alaska has long known it needs reform of its corrections system. More specific information about what in the system is broken and what can be done to fix it has been coming to light in recent weeks. Fortunately, corrections reform — at a nexus of costs to the state and persistent crime issues — is so far proving to be the rare issue that almost all members of the Alaska Legislature and Gov. Bill Walker are keen to work together to achieve. The Alaska Criminal Justice Commission's recently released Justice Reinvestment Report should be a framework to help guide those efforts.

As it stands, Alaska's prison system is costly and getting costlier. The state prison population has grown by 27 percent during the past decade, according to the commission's study, outpacing statewide population growth by a factor of three. Many of those in custody aren't there because of a conviction but because of the often lengthy period between arrest and trial — the prison population of those in pre-trial custody has grown a massive 81 percent in the last 10 years. And sentences for those who have committed felonies are also getting longer, by an average of more than 30 percent apiece since 2005. All of that adds up to more demand for prison beds than the state has supply to provide. The growing population necessitated the construction of the \$240 million Goose Creek prison in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, completed in 2012. If nothing is done to change the underlying trends in Alaska's justice and corrections systems, the commission's report forecasts the state's prisons will again be full to capacity in 2017. Changes must be made, and soon.

In addition to the expense of building prisons and housing prisoners, the commission and an investigative team have shed light on prison practices that are poor and sometimes dangerous to inmates and staff. In particular, the commission recommended that the state end the practice of taking residents who are chronically inebriated or otherwise unable to care for themselves to prison for what's known as a Title 47 protective custody hold. While the notion of the "drunk tank" is well established in American life, in practice those taken into custody for the holds often have medical or psychological needs that prisons would be ill-equipped to handle even if they had the resources. Some have died during these holds, as in the case of Fairbanks resident Gilbert John in August. There are other community groups and services that could more properly care for such people, and doing so would not only lead to better outcomes for the subjects of the hold but help ensure the state doesn't expose itself to massive liability if the corrections system is found culpable in an inmate's death.

The commission's report lays out almost two dozen fairly specific recommendations about how to help reform the state corrections system — items it says will save the state \$424 million during the next decade. Even without that fiscal motivation, ensuring better outcomes for those Alaska's prisons house is motivation enough to implement the recommendations. But in a time of intense budget pressure, the savings estimated to result mean the Legislature and Gov. Walker should make corrections reform a top priority and not let it fall by the wayside in pursuit of other goals.