

Criminal justice commission recommends \$424 million in savings

By [JAMES BROOKS](#)

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The state commission tasked with cutting costs in Alaska's criminal justice system has come up with a slate of suggestions that could save Alaska's budget \$424 million over the next 10 years.

In a report released Thursday, the members of the Alaska Criminal Justice Commission suggest 21 policy changes that would reduce the growth of Alaska's prison population.

"It's going to be easy to stand behind this," said Sen. John Coghill, R-North Pole and a member of the criminal justice commission.

Among the commission's recommendations:

- Limit the use of prison for misdemeanors, and prefer citations over arrest for non-violent offenses;
- Use inflation to raise the threshold for felony property crimes;
- Create incentives for good behavior while on parole or electronic monitoring;
- Reduce pre-trial prison time;
- Make sure legislators are aware of the long-term consequences of criminal statutes;
- Classify simple drug possession as a misdemeanor, not a felony.

Juneau Police Dept. Lt. Kris Sell is a member of the commission and helped draft the recommendations. Speaking to the Juneau Chamber of Commerce on Thursday, she said she came into the process with the notion that the best solution for crime was prison time.

As the commission worked, her mind was changed, she said.

"As you run people through the criminal justice system, they become more dangerous," Sell said.

The idea is to find the "sweet spot" where punishments are severe enough to deter crime but not so severe that they leave offenders with no alternative but crime.

She gave the example of pre-trial detention.

If a person is arrested for a minor crime but is unable to pay bail and thus must remain in jail, she is likely to lose his or her job. Without a job, she's more likely to resort to crime.

Stiffer jail sentences can be counterproductive, Sell said, and the Criminal Justice Commission report found that mandatory stiff sentences for drug crimes can divert resources away from violent offenders who must be imprisoned to protect the public.

The commission was created in 2014 by the Alaska Legislature, which created the 13-member group to address the rising number of Alaskans in prison. In 2004, the Alaska Department of Corrections averaged 3,903 inmates in its prisons on any given day. By 2014, that figure had risen to 5,095. According to forecasts, the figure will rise to 6,511 by 2024 unless action is taken.

Those rising figures accompany rising costs. In fiscal year 2014, the state spent \$327 million on the Department of Corrections, up from \$184 million in fiscal year 2005.

This spring, the commission got assistance from the Pew Charitable Trusts, which has contributed to similar programs nationwide.

If its 21 consensus recommendations are accepted, the commission projects that the state's prison population would drop over the next several years, and Alaska would have about 100 more prisoners in 2024 as it did in 2004.

The commission's recommendations now head to Gov. Bill Walker, who is expected to introduce legislation to that would turn them into law.

In a statement Thursday, Walker thanked Senate President Sen. Kevin Meyer, R-Anchorage, and House Speaker Rep. Mike Chenault, R-Nikiski, for encouraging the commission's work.

"I stand with legislative leaders when I say that criminal justice reform is a priority for the state, and I applaud them for their creation of this important commission," Walker said.