

A CORRECTIONS IN CORRECTIONS

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For the past two decades the total population of our state has shown no actual growth. It is ironic that our census count in the state's corrections system(s) has grown by about 350 percent during this same time frame.

In the early nineties, the department of corrections contracted with the federal government to house and provide services for individuals who had been adjudicated and sentenced in their system. This was done to more efficiently utilize our investment in plant facilities and staff. It was a simple application of the "principle of the economies of scale and volume". We had space and they had prisoners.

Over the past fifteen years this has changed dramatically. Today, our prison facilities are filled to capacity. During this time we have added two additional prison campuses; one located at Jamestown and a second all female facility in New England. In addition, we are contracting with regional law enforcement centers in state and private prison operations out of state to house our growing inmate population.

Many reasons have been cited for this dramatic population increase in the corrections population. Among them:

1. Minimum mandatory sentencing laws enacted by the state legislature.
2. An overall increase in crime and violent behavior nationally; many people feel that North Dakota is just moving along with a national trend.
3. A significant increase in substance abuse; especially meth.

I do not choose to spend time going over these reasons, and others in this document. But rather, I would like to stimulate our thinking in terms of treatment and rehabilitation services. Along with this, I would like us to take a look at some of the state's under utilized capital resources that could play a vital role in developing a more cost efficient and socially more appropriate approach to our corrections problem(s).

State policy makers and economic developers have come to realize the important value of the university system, and the significant role that it can play in their strategic planning and in facilitating the delivery of their objectives. I believe that the university system has the capacity to also play an equally important role in helping us address our growing problems in corrections. It is very important at this time to keep this in mind as the legislature considers the future of the corrections system, including the proposed new construction initiative.

To start this discussion, I am going to lay out my objective using these two very simplistic statements:

1. Presently our prison system is greatly overcrowded and current statistical data warns that inmate numbers will continue to steadily grow.
2. Our current state supported university system consisting of 11 campuses has more capacity than is needed; and a declining birthrate and an aging population should tell us we need to think creatively as plans for the system's future are considered.

Addressing An Overcrowded System

One cannot dispute that our current prison campuses infrastructure is inadequate and will run out of room to properly and safely house an increasing inmate population. There are some important considerations that need be addressed in this regard.

1. Staff safety should always be a top priority. Studies have clearly identified many of our cell blocks and ancillary services facilities raise concerns about the safety of staff members. We have an obligation to assure employees that their personal safety is a paramount concern.
2. It is important that our facilities and our prison's plant operations meet nothing less than minimum accreditation requirements. We should always meet these requirements as a matter of staff/inmate safety and because it is the civilized thing to do.

Many legislators and citizens feel that we can achieve these requirements/objectives by investing about 40 to 50 million dollars in remodeling and upgrading current facilities. Most of these same people feel that a totally new facility costing in the 80 to 90 million dollar range is not a prudent investment. They contend that an added expenditure of 30 to 40 million dollars for the construction of a totally new facility could be better invested in treatment, rehabilitation and education services.

Rather than spending money ongoing for remodeling and updates, proponents supporting appropriating 80 to 90 million dollars to build an entirely new prison facility will argue that their approach is more economical in the long run. Essentially, the debate is a simple two phased discussion; (1) spend 40 to 50 million dollars to remodel the existing plant, or (2) spend 80 to 90 million dollars to build a totally new facility. Numerous supporters of either plan point out that the investment in remodeling or in new construction does little to address the greater issue of a growing inmate population. They look at both proposals as addressing a housing issue only, and that the causes for the growth in our prison's inmate numbers remains unanswered.

A Probable Use For Excess Capacity In The University System

For many years there has been an ongoing debate regarding the need for the number of university and college campuses that make up the state's university system. Skeptics argue that 11 campuses are more than what our state needs. There is a contention that some of our schools are under-utilized and cause fiscal and managerial inefficiencies in the overall system. Even those who support the current system will admit that, it is very difficult for some of our smaller institutions to be competitive when it comes to student recruitment and competing for scarce budget dollars. Critics contend that some of these institutions are being subsidized to politically appease the communities where they are located.

One could point out that a conversation between corrections and the university system would be appropriate at this time. Corrections is a system in need of more plant capacity and aggressive treatment and rehabilitation services. Some locations within the university system have under-utilized plant capacity in the form of classroom/instruction space and housing. It appears that such a conversation could lead to (a) solution(s) to problems within corrections and/or the university system.

Space for consultation/rehabilitation services may be referred to as a conference room at a prison, the same room is called a classroom on a college campus. At the prison, housing is called a cellblock, similar space on a college campus is called a dormitory. In either case, both can be secured facilities. Addressing plant and space issues seem to be rather academic in nature and are about the most efficient use of space and public investment dollars. Inevitably the politics of all of this will cause the greatest amount of debate and controversy.

Sentenced To Treatment And An Education

The search for reasons for criminal and deviant behavior has generated countless clinical studies of prison inmates. An accumulation of data and collaborative assessment documents have produced volumes of individual profiles. These profiled accounts of individual inmates reveal a number of compelling experiences and circumstances that help explain criminal and deviant behavior(s).

Studies point out certain consistent and concurring patterns in these profiles. To no one's surprise substance abuse, dysfunctional family backgrounds, risky behaviors, etc...are standard dominant factors. Interestingly, is an identifiable pattern of sub-standard academic achievement that seems to stand out in a vast majority of these profiles. Their educated skill levels (reading, language, math, etc...scores) and their education progress (accomplished grade level) is lower than citizens overall. This can give a rational explanation why their judgement skills maybe sub-standard and why their career opportunities are limited and may have been impaired. This would indicate that a successful treatment and rehabilitation program needs an education component.

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For non-violent, non-predatory and first time offenders sentencing them to a treatment and an educational setting would be more appropriate than a traditional prison. There would need to be a clear understanding that this is an opportunity that is much desirable then the current alternative. The objective is very clear and straight forward. This is about a treatment program to address your addictions/afflictions and an education plan to enhance your personal and career skills to help you become a more self-sufficient person.

This would need to be a very structured initiative with progressive support and education services components. Outlined below is an example:

1. Every participant would be required to enter and to fully participate in a treatment program.
 - a. Individual counseling.
 - b. Group counseling.
 - c. Support groups like alcoholic anonymous, narcotics anonymous, etc.(Footnote: some of these services might qualify for medicaid participation.)
2. Every participant would be tested to identify their educational status.
 - a. For many, a start would be with remedial instruction in basic subject areas.
 - b. The objective is to raise their achievement levels, not to just pass a GED test. We would like them to earn a high school diploma.
 - c. Once an acceptable education level has been achieved the participant then becomes eligible to move into a career training/education program.(Footnote: when these participants enter certificate and degree programs they might become eligible for funding assistance like PELL Grants, guaranteed student loans, etc.)
3. These participants would be required, whenever it is possible to pay a reasonable amount for their costs back to the system.

A Paradigm Change

An objective would be to locate these corrections/education laboratories on (a) small campus(es). The(se) campus(es) would continue to offer most, or all of their current educational curriculum. We would consider them to essentially be community type colleges.

There are many who would likely support the idea of adding a corrections component to an existing campus's mission. A common response, however maybe, "a novel and a good idea though not in my neighborhood". This would be a major issue that would have to be addressed.

It is being suggested that our smaller campuses could bid to have a corrections program located on their site. This would allow for self determination in the matter and hopefully would

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A Paradigm Change (continued)

come about as a result of the school's buy-in into the concept and with community acceptance. We would look at the(se) campus(es) as "centers of excellence" in the fields of social and educational experimentation.

There are many positive arguments that can be made in behalf of this concept. Strong arguments could be made that this would be a much better approach to handling the correctional needs of low to medium risk inmates. This would segregate, those inmates viewed as having a much greater possibility to successfully be rehabilitated, from the hard-core inmate population. Inmates completing the program would leave with greatly improved personal and career skills, which should greatly enhance their chances for succeeding in the outside world.

There are a number of significant fiscal benefits to consider as this recommendations is being reviewed and assessed.

1. Closing (an) existing campus(es) would have significant up-front costs and would have long-term negative affects upon the community(ies) where it (they) is (are) now located.
2. A number of our campuses have existing facilities and infra-structure that are under-utilized at the present time. Rather than build more prison space we could utilize existing plant capabilities in the current system.
3. There are circumstances where the inmates could contribute to the cost of their maintenance and services.

The moment has arrived for policy makers to seriously look at these kind of possibilities. We have the opportunity to address problematic situations that have plagued two very costly and important public systems in our state for a long time. It is time to "think-out-of-the-box".