

Hot Topic: 2/4/2010

Prison Closings The governor closes Cheshire's prison. Why? And is that really a good idea?

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By Betsy Yagla



Last month, the state quietly closed the low-security Webster prison in Cheshire. Correction officer union members seem to be the only ones bad-mouthing the decision. But people may change their tune if the prison population shoots up again.

State Rep. Mike Lawlor, one of the state's most well-informed and most vocal observers of the criminal justice system, agrees that it makes sense to close it. In fact, the state's closed nine prisons in the last 20 years. But he warns that if budget cuts to essential social services — like mental health and homeless shelters — increase, the decision to close a prison could come back to haunt the state.

What's the problem?

First, the state's budget crisis: There's a \$500 million gap, and everything is on the table when it comes to cuts. As part of the solution, Gov. Jodi Rell asked the Department of Corrections to consider closing a prison. She said one should close because the prison population has declined.

Is that true?

That depends on your benchmark. In 2000, the population was relatively low, with an average of 17,300 inmates. In 2003, it shot up to 19,300. Three years later, it went down to 18,000. After the brutal Cheshire murders of three-fourths of the Petit family in 2007 by two recently paroled inmates, Gov. Rell temporarily halted parole and the prison population soared to an all-time high of 19,894 in Feb. 2008. Since then, parole has been reinstated and the numbers have dropped down to about 18,300. So the current prison population is lower than it was at its all-time high, but not lower than in 2006 (18,000) or 2000 (17,300).

Why does the population ebb and flow?

Not because of any crime wave, as you might think. In 2003, the numbers shot up after then-Gov. John Rowland laid off nearly 3,000 state employees, including many parole and probation officers. At the time, Connecticut's prison population was growing 50 percent faster than the national average. State Rep. Mike Lawlor, D-East Haven and judiciary chairman, cites a lack of probation officers as the reason.

"Their case loads went up," Lawlor says. "When that happens, the probation violations go way up."

Probation officers are like preventative medicine: Monitoring recently-released inmates can prevent bigger problems down the line.

"It's very interesting what factors affect the prison population," Lawlor says. "Typically it's budget cuts in other areas, like homeless shelters, probation and parole, mental health services and then people go to jail. Put the money back into those things and the prison population goes back down."

Can we keep the prison population low?

Violation of probation is the most common reason people are incarcerated. Some probation violations deserve prison time. Others, "are more in the screw-up category, like when they don't show up for appointments," Lawlor says.

That too, can get you prison time. When probation officers have smaller case loads they can do a better job at being a supportive resource and keeping people out of prison.

"If you can get that under control, you can control the prison population," he says.

In 2008, after the state legislature passed a package of reform laws in the wake of the Cheshire murders, more probation officers were hired and case loads went down. (The prison population went up, though, because of Rell's ban on probation.) But now case loads are back up, due to budget-cutting measures like a hiring freeze and early retirements.

Both took a toll on probation officer staffing.

"The more their case load goes up, the more the prison population goes up," Lawlor says. "This good news could easily all unravel due to the budget crisis."

Why Webster?

As the prison population has declined, the state's Department of Corrections closed various parts of prisons. Cheshire's Webster Correctional Institute was a minimum security prison primarily for men at the end of their sentences. It was also among the state's smallest prisons, with about 500 beds. The DOC closed two of its four housing units.

"We are always looking for inefficiencies due to the budget situation," says DOC spokesman Brian Garnett.

Garnett says closing Webster was an obvious choice, because it was only half-full with about 220 inmates. But the union representing correctional officers takes issue with those numbers. Frankie Batista, who worked at Webster before its closure, claims 220 is an artificially low number.

"About 10 months ago we heard Webster might close," Batista says. "Then we got less inmates transferred in while others were getting out because their sentence was up."

What's the impact of the closure?

"Due to the closure, inmates are being held in 'unconventional housing' at facilities that weren't designed to house inmates," says Dwayne Bickford, president of Local 387, the union that represents Cheshire correction officers.

The result is overcrowding that can cause safety issues for correction officers, Bickford says. In some places, there are 10 inmates per toilet.

Garnett denies claims of overcrowding.

"At this point in time, we have very limited overflow, and it's not in any way a result of closing Cheshire."

Overflow, Garnett says, typically happens at jails, not prisons. In jails, numerous arrests are made in a short time causing inmates to wait for court dates before they're released or transferred to prison.

Will closing a prison save money?

About \$3.4 million a year, according to DOC estimates. Since there were no layoffs associated with the closure, the savings will come from less maintenance and fewer utilities. The building won't be sold, Garnett says. Instead, it will be mothballed in case the prison population shoots back up.

Is Connecticut alone?

Nope. In 2009, five states closed prisons to save money. Many faced similar opposition from union members who worried about the closures' impact on prison safety.