

Legislative committee approves correction officer support bill

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HARTFORD — Bills that would expand prison staff and would require Internet posting of criminal court proceedings topped a list of measures approved Friday by the state legislature's Judiciary Committee.

The state Correction Department, which currently employs 4,029 correction officers, would dramatically increase under the staffing bill, which now heads to the legislature's Appropriations Committee.

The measure, approved 20-14, calls for approximately 1,400 new officer positions, an increase advocates said is necessary to reduce an excessive workload for existing staff.

Correction officers "have a higher incident of being asked to work double- and triple-shifts," said Sen. John A. Kissel, R-Enfield, whose district includes several prisons. "It's putting a tremendous stress on the line officers."

But even after reductions in overtime are calculated, the bill would increase Correction Department personnel costs by about \$45 million annually, according to legislative fiscal analysts.

"That \$45 million is better spent, I believe, in finding new ways to reduce our prison population," said Rep. Robert Farr, R-West Hartford.

He noted that over the past two years legislators have expanded investments in job training and other programs aimed at helping

inmates find work after prison and curbing recidivism.

Correction Commissioner Theresa Lantz told the committee earlier this week that her department, which has 158 vacant officer posts still to fill, has an adequate number of positions.

Lantz did testify that there's been a 10 percent decrease in overtime this fiscal year compared with 2004-05, but union officials contend the department still relies too heavily on mandatory overtime.

In other business Friday, the Judiciary Committee also adopted bills that would:

Allow owners who lose property through the eminent domain process to re-purchase it under certain conditions. In particular, an owner could buy the property back

if it has not been used for a public purpose as originally stated when the taking occurred.

And restrict cities and towns' ability to take property through

eminent domain as part of economic development initiatives. The measure also would create a new state post known as the "property rights ombudsman."