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## Prison costs breaking budget, panel told

Niki Kelly | The Journal Gazette

INDIANAPOLIS – During state budget hearings Monday, Indiana Department of Correction officials targeted lawmakers as the reason for spending and offender population increases.

“Politicians have gotten very good at playing politics with the criminal justice system,” DOC Commissioner Edwin Buss said, noting it’s easy to accuse each other of being soft on crime.

And Buss told members of the State Budget Committee it will take courageous lawmakers to overhaul sentencing laws in the 2011 legislative session, or state prison costs will continue to skyrocket.

In the last 20 years, lawmakers have amended the criminal code 107 times to either add new crimes or lengthen the prison sentences of existing crimes.

The department asked for a budget of \$667.4 million in fiscal year 2012 and \$675.2 million in fiscal year 2013. Spending in the current fiscal year is expected to be \$658 million.

Most of the 1 percent increase each year is related to an ongoing rise in offenders – about 1,000 a year. The department houses about 29,000 inmates, and the state hasn’t built new prison space since 2002.

“If there was a closet, we took the door off and put a couple bunks in it,” Buss told the committee, which is considering requests for the state’s next biennial budget.

He also said the department has cut staff by almost 1,000 and is operating with hundreds of prison guard vacancies. But those savings have been eaten up by increased food and medical costs for the new prisoners.

The request comes as initial recommendations from a major sentencing overhaul study are set to be released next week.

Changes could include decreasing prison time for certain crimes; moving more offenders to community corrections and revamping the state’s earned credit rules.

“This is not easy,” said Rep. Jeff Espich, R-Uniondale. “This is going to take a lot of guts.”

Rep. Eric Turner, R-Marion, said he is as guilty as other lawmakers who react to terrible crimes by increasing penalties or creating new statutes.

“But the public is paying the price,” he said. “Now we are trying to fix it in one fell swoop, and it’s going to be very difficult.”

Much of the conversation Monday focused on the roughly 3,000 non-violent or low-level offenders serving less than a year in a state prison at any given time.

Sending some of these offenders to community corrections at a lower daily cost could help save the state millions of dollars but doesn’t address systemic changes to sentencing.

“The choice to do nothing will be very expensive,” State Budget Director Adam Horst said.

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