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Hard sentences come at big price

Jeff Wiehe | The Journal Gazette

Materials and supplies: more than \$8 million.

Preventive maintenance: an additional \$4 million.

Food service: more than \$33 million.

Medical costs: \$85 million and some change.

That's just a sampling of what taxpayers spent on adult inmates housed within the Indiana Department of Correction during the 2009-10 fiscal year.

All in all, each adult inmate – whether he or she served time behind prison walls or in a camp or in a prison-run re-entry program – cost \$52.60 a day, on average.

Grand total to house roughly 26,000 inmates during that year: \$504.5 million.

Prison officials say those numbers will balloon if Indiana's prison population continues to increase. They say the cost could rise to \$1.2 billion in the next six years, just to build and staff the new prison they say would be necessary to house additional inmates.

At the crux of the issue are people being sent to prison for relatively low-level offenses – at least compared with other states – like theft and some drug crimes, according to those who are proposing new sentencing guidelines to lawmakers.

"If we don't do something, we'll need to build new prisons," Department of Correction spokesman Douglas Garrison said. "The question now is, 'Are we incarcerating the right people?'"

No invitations

In the past decade, Indiana's crime rate has fallen.

Yet at the same time the state's prison population rose by almost half, from 19,309 on Jan. 1, 2000, to 28,389 on Jan. 1, 2010, according to Department of Correction statistics.

That's a 47 percent increase, far exceeding the increases seen in states surrounding Indiana.

Not surprisingly, appropriations for the prison system from the state's general fund soared during the same span – from \$495 million in 2000 to \$679 million in 2010, according to a joint report from the Pew Center on the States and Council of State Governments Justice Center.

"It's a function of the prison population," Garrison said of the increase.

According to the Pew and Justice Center study, the increase stems from harsh sentencing requirements for low-level crimes.

Sixty-six percent of prison inmates end up spending less than a year behind bars, the study found.

"Indiana's laws do not result in sentences that are proportionate to the severity of the crime," the study said.

Thefts in Indiana, even petty thefts such as shoplifting, are still considered a felony and can net a year or more in prison. Dealing 3 grams of cocaine can result in six to 20 years in prison, as compared with Ohio, where the same crime calls for a maximum of one year in prison.

A proposal before Indiana lawmakers would address some of these issues to ease the prison population.

"The department does not send out invitations," Garrison said. "We're a bit at the mercy of who gets sent to us."

As the population has risen, prison officials have tried to save money in many places, according to Garrison.

Medical treatment, food services and education are now contracted out to other parties, he said.

Expenses

What the Indiana Department of Correction spent on adult facilities – where it costs an average \$52.60 a day to keep an inmate – during the fiscal year 2009-10:

Personnel services (payroll, salaries, etc.)...\$307.6 million

Utilities, postage, etc....\$26.2 million

Services by contract...\$33.8 million

Materials/supplies...\$8.8 million

Equipment...\$617,512

Grants, awards...\$52,594

In-state travel...\$702,181

Out-of-state travel...\$1.8 million

Adjustments...\$1.9 million

Food service...\$33.2 million

Medical cost...\$85.1 million

Preventive maintenance...\$4.3 million

Source: Indiana Department of Correction

Correcting

Corrections

•Fourth in a five-day series on the state of the Indiana prison system

Coming up

Thursday: Melissa Long describes wearing an ankle bracelet

On TV

•Indiana's NewsCenter also examines sentencing reform this week on newscasts at 5 and 11 p.m. today and Thursday.

Previously, the prison system used its own personnel in those areas, providing salaries and benefits.

Now that such services are contracted out, they can be provided more efficiently and at a cheaper price, Garrison said.

Still, Indiana's prison population is expected to increase to more than 34,000 inmates by 2017, which means the Department of Correction will need more money, more staff and most importantly, more space.

Indiana's last prison was built in 2002. A new one would cost more than \$500 million to staff and more than \$600 million to construct, according to the Department of Correction.

Money the issue

The proposal to decrease the prison population before state legislators calls for more offenders to be sent to county-run community corrections.

Of the 77 community corrections programs in the state, Allen County's is considered one of the best. These programs, now paid for by grants to counties from the Department of Correction, can monitor some offenders with ankle bracelets.

The offenders also pay into the program and in many cases need to have a job to remain in such a program.

The proposal would require all counties to provide such services or contract for those services. Again, the question comes down to money.

In northeast Indiana, Noble, Huntington, LaGrange and Kosciusko counties do not have community corrections programs. How much each county would get, and how much it would take to start a program from scratch is hard to say.

The amount that would be provided to each county, according to the proposal, is still being discussed in the General Assembly.

In one plan that has been discussed, the state would annually dish out \$5 million to \$10 million combined to all the counties in the state. But that would mean each county could get \$109,000 on average.

That worries some who say that is nowhere near enough to run a community corrections program.

By contrast, in 2008, the Department of Correction gave out more than \$29 million in grants to all the community corrections programs throughout the state.

"We'd like to see some hard numbers," said David Bottorff, executive director of the Indiana Association of Counties, of the current proposal.

The concern is valid.

The Allen County Community Corrections program, which served 2,161 offenders during the 2008-09 fiscal year, needed \$5.5 million to operate, according to the agency's most recent annual report on its website.

More than \$3 million of that total came from the state.

And getting a new community corrections program off the ground is no easy task, according to Bottorff.

An advisory board would have to be created by that county to set up such a program, or possibly some counties would be able to partner with other counties that already have such programs.

The amount spent on health care costs would vary by county as would miscellaneous costs.

A little more than \$100,000 a year per county just might not be enough.

"Local costs may be more than state costs," Bottorff said.

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