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State representative offers remedies to overcrowded prisons

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In a soon to be released report, the Texas House Corrections Committee will issue a series of recommendations for reforming the Texas Prison and Corrections system, which has been plagued by issues of overcrowding, said State Rep. Jerry Madden, R-Plano, chairman of the House Corrections Committee.

The interim committee report will deal with five major issues facing the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the Texas Youth Commission, which runs the state's juvenile detention facilities, Madden said. The recommendations include proposals to reform probation, reduce prison overcrowding, reduce health care expenditures, expand drug and alcohol treatment and examine the Texas Youth Commission.

The report will review the recommendations made by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the Youth Commission during the operational hearings held by the Sunset Advisory Commission in November. The report will also detail the issues the corrections committee will address during the upcoming 80th legislative session, Madden said.

The report's section on probation reform will include the reintroduction of a modified version of House Bill 2193, Madden said. Passed by the House and Senate during the 79th legislative session, but vetoed by Gov. Rick Perry, HB 2193 would have cut probation periods and instituted reform in an effort to reduce the number of technical revocations of probation.

Madden said the corrections committee worked with various think tanks and the governor's staff in an effort to draw up a compromise bill for introduction before the end of the 80th session.

Probation reform is key to reducing the overpopulation problems Texas prisons will experience in the next four years, according to the forthcoming report and other studies.

Forty percent of prison intakes are from probation violations, and half of those violators are put into the prison system because of technical violations, according to a June report by the conservative think tank Texas Public Policy Foundation. The report recommends reduction of probation sentencing terms and simplification of the rules of supervision as ways to help correct the problem.

Madden said HB 2193's successor, which has yet to be filed, will do just that. The bill would also focus probation resources on working with higher risk individuals who are in their first years of probation, he said.

Such reform is necessary to reduce prison overpopulation and the need for new prisons, saving taxpayers money, said Marc Levin, a policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

The report will also recommend an expansion of drug courts in Texas to help reduce case loads

involving minor drug crimes on the criminal court system, Madden said. It will look into the alternative education programs conducted by the Youth Commission to see if some juvenile offenders could be returned to regular education programs and will look into reform of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's health care system to reduce costs and improve care, he said.

About 80 percent of all inmates in Texas prisons, including death row inmates, are cared for by the UT Medical Branch, said Dr. Owen Murray, UTMB's chief physician executive of correctional health care, in a November interview with the Texan. He said UTMB receives about \$6.75 per inmate per day, even when they are not being treated, to provide health care to the prison system through a contract with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice that's worth more than \$300 million.

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