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Pay inmates? No, but let's correct some prison problems

7:09 pm December 17, 2010, by Kyle Wingfield

Georgia's next governor, Nathan Deal, said Wednesday the state must cut its work force to balance the budget.

Psst...Mr. Deal! Wanna know who ought to be first in line for the pink slips? How about the prison guards who sold so many cell phones to inmates that the jailbirds were able to organize a short-lived protest in state penitentiaries this month?

Depending on whom you believe, either the wardens at four state prisons locked down inmates for several days to pre-empt a protest, or the prisoners themselves refused to leave their cells to perform their work assignments.

The inmates used their contraband mobile phones — it's a felony in this state for a prisoner to possess one — to send text messages to one another. Some of them used the phones to call an AJC reporter to claim credit for the work stoppage.

Their gripe? In large part, it's that they want to be paid for working jobs within the lockups and on other state property.

One of them, a convicted murderer named Diego, told our reporter that he paid a prison guard \$350 for a pre-paid phone. So, forgive me for doubting these guys are truly hurting for cash.

But let's say the offending guards are caught. And let's say the inmates are made to understand they're not going to start getting paid — not beyond the food, shelter and health care they already receive, that is.

And certainly not when the state is eyeing up to \$2 billion more in budget cuts. Far from paying inmates, the Georgia Department of Corrections, like other state agencies, will probably have to further tighten its belt.

We spend about \$1 billion a year on Corrections. The agency needs some creative, money-saving solutions.

One in 13 Georgia adults is in jail or on probation or parole. That's the nation's highest rate. And once inmates are released, they're returning to prison in alarming numbers. During the past decade, two in three ex-cons have been re-arrested within three years. Something isn't working.

There's little wiggle room for dealing with killers like Diego. But we ought to look seriously at alternative options for those incarcerated for lesser crimes.

And we might find some possibilities in another historically tough-on-crime state: Texas.

In a recent essay for the free-market Georgia Public Policy Foundation, Marc Levin of the Center for Effective Justice in Texas focused on some policies toward nonviolent offenders in his state that appear to be more effective and less expensive than what we're trying.

Since 2005, Levin wrote, Texas has saved more than \$2 billion in projected prison costs through "reforms to strengthen community-based supervision, sanctions and treatment options for nonviolent offenders." At the same time, the state's crime rate in 2009 was at its lowest level since 1973.

Here's a place to start in Georgia. According to Levin, we spend \$151 million a year to house about 9,000 drug offenders. It's not only dealers who are serving long sentences: The "average [Georgia] inmate released in 2009 on a drug possession charge," he wrote, "spent 21 months locked up..."

We have drug courts and day-reporting centers that are ripe for expansion. Levin's Texas example also suggests more drug testing, graduated punishments and incentives for parolees to behave themselves.

Then we can focus on keeping violent guys like Diego behind bars. They need to pay for their crimes, not get paid.

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