

## Gov. Scott wants to reform Florida prison system

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— Eager to cut costs in Florida prisons, Gov. Rick Scott is taking a cue from reform advocates and proposing more money to help inmates fight drug and alcohol abuse, improve mental health and learn literacy skills.

The proposal marks a shift in strategy for Scott, who campaigned on cutting the prison budget. Now he wants to redistribute resources in a way lawmakers and reformers have long discussed: to make inmates more productive citizens, so they are less likely to return to prison.

“We’re clearly not ‘correcting’ anything, much less rehabilitating them,” said Vicki Lukis, a member of an agency task force. “The old model is lock ‘em up and wait for them to return ... I hope that in a couple of years, we’ll see a very different Department of Corrections.”

In Florida’s revolving-door prison system, one of every three inmates commits new crimes after release and is back in custody within a few years.

Decades of tough-on-crime laws have nurtured a large population of hard-core felons, and the Department of Corrections’ recidivism rate carries an astronomical price tag for taxpayers.

Scott wants the Legislature to transfer about 2,000 inmates from state-run prisons to privately-run lockups that have empty beds. Scott’s office says that would save \$135 million in the first year, and the savings would swell to \$216 million due to changes in retirement benefits for agency employees.

The money would pay for re-entry, education and prevention programs. The state spends \$2.4 billion a year to incarcerate more than 101,000 inmates at nearly 150 facilities.

Sweeping changes are already underway at the Department of Corrections. The expected dismissals of longtime senior employees began Tuesday afternoon with more than a dozen firings, including deputy secretaries George Sapp and Rick Davison, and regional directors Gerald Wasi, Marta Villacorta, Randall Bryant and Beth Atchison.

Next week, the agency welcomes a new boss, Edwin Buss, Indiana’s commissioner of corrections. Buss’ chief of staff in Indianapolis, Daniel Ronay, is adjusting to the same post in Tallahassee.

“We can’t do business as usual,” said Rep. Rich Glorioso, R-Plant City, chairman of a House budget subcommittee that oversees the prison system. “It’s not working.”

Glorioso publicly seethed two weeks ago when the agency, as part of a 15 percent budget-cutting exercise, suggested releasing more than 10,000 inmates for good behavior and closing 10 prisons — ideas that the Legislature would never seriously consider. Such a proposal was “appalling,” Glorioso said, and a clear signal that the agency needs more innovative thinking.

Scott's proposals mirror a growing national conservative movement known as Right on Crime, which argues that too many prisoners are locked up for non-violent crimes or for technical violations of probation. The movement ([www.rightoncrime.com](http://www.rightoncrime.com)) claims too little money is spent teaching life skills to inmates so they can be productive citizens after they leave prison.

At the same time, voices in the Tallahassee power structure such as Florida TaxWatch and Associated Industries of Florida have called for a similar approach. Their umbrella group, the Coalition for Smart Justice, is housed in the Collins Center for Public Policy.

"Most of the inmates in Florida's prisons are going to be getting out, and if they're not employable, they're going to commit more crimes, and there's going to be more victims," said AIF President Barney Bishop. "If we don't change this, we're just going to be incarcerating more people and building more prisons."

Scott also wants to add two more faith- and character-based prisons to four already in existence from a program begun more than a decade ago by former Gov. Jeb Bush. About 4,300 inmates are enrolled in faith-based programs, including 300 women at Hillsborough Correctional Institution in Tampa.

Statistics show character-building programs make inmates less likely than other prisoners to end up back in prison.

Among the experts urging the state to embark on a new corrections path is Allison deFoor, a former Monroe County sheriff and judge and an Episcopal priest with a fervent belief in the power of faith- and character-based programs.

Equally important, deFoor said, is a more enlightened policy on juvenile justice that diverts teenagers from detention centers that he said are a breeding ground for habitual criminal behavior.

DeFoor said he was heartened by a provision buried near the end of Scott's lengthy budget proposal: a new oversight board to monitor the prison system. The new Florida Board of Criminal and Juvenile Justice, subject to a future executive order Scott plans to issue, would receive \$350,000 and a staff of four in its first year of operation.

"These people haven't had anyone questioning them for generations," deFoor said.

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