



**Tulsa's state-of-the-art Hearing Aid Center**  
**call: 1.800.722.8050**

MEMBER CENTER: [Create Account](#) | [Log In](#)

[SITE SEARCH](#)

[WEB SEARCH BY Google™](#)



[Good Morning Oklahoma](#)

[Good Day Tulsa](#)

[Waiting Child](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Health Connections](#)

[home](#)

[news](#)

[weather](#)

[sports](#)

[video](#)

[features](#)

[lifestyle](#)

[about us](#)

[health](#)

[money](#)

[games](#)



[Email](#)

[Share |](#)

[Print](#)

[Text Size](#)

## Bill to ease Okla.'s prison growth clears House

[Recommend](#)

Be the first of your friends to recommend this.

*Associated Press - March 15, 2011 8:25 PM ET*

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) - A plan to slow the growth of Oklahoma's prison population by expanding community sentencing and the use of electronic monitoring was overwhelmingly approved Tuesday in the House, where lawmakers also decided to shift money to prevent more furloughs of corrections workers.

With a \$500 million hole in next year's budget, lawmakers are grappling with how to control spending for the Oklahoma Departments of Corrections, which currently consumes about 7% of the state budget.

Republican House Speaker Kris Steele, a minister from Shawnee, has said 1 of his top priorities this year is changing the state's criminal justice system to divert more nonviolent, low-risk criminals to community sentencing.

"We can be both tough on crime and smart on crime at the same time," Steele said Tuesday. "Certainly if a person is a danger to society or a threat to public safety, that person ought to be incarcerated."

"But as we sit here today we know that our prisons are currently at 99% capacity. That means that for those dangerous, violent offenders, there's really no place to house them."

Besides increasing the number of criminals eligible for alternative sentencing, Steele's bill also restricts the governor's role in the parole process. The move is expected to increase the number of inmates released on parole.

Currently, the governor must sign every parole before an inmate is released. Under Steele's bill, the governor's role would be limited to inmates convicted of certain violent or sexual crimes.

For more than a decade, Oklahoma has led the nation in its incarceration rate of women, and the state consistently ranks among the top five in its incarceration rate for men.

Of the more than 25,000 inmates in Oklahoma prisons, nearly 52% are incarcerated for nonviolent offense, according to Department of Corrections statistics. The top two crimes, which account for more than 27% of inmates, are distribution and possession of drugs.

Steele's proposals are based in part on changes implemented in Texas, which saved \$137 million and saw its crime rate decrease after passing similar laws, said Marc Levin, president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

"Instead of pouring more money into the current corrections system, we need to restructure it to make sure taxpayers are getting the most for their money," Levin said. "States can save millions by increasing rehabilitation programs, which are often more effective than incarceration."

Steele acknowledged that finding additional funding for community sentencing and drug treatment for offenders will be difficult.

"We're going to have to fight for some appropriations money up front," he said.

Prison workers already are being forced to take one unpaid furlough day each month through June 30. To prevent additional furloughs as a result of last year's budget cuts, Republican leaders agreed to a plan that allows the Department of Corrections to take \$5.25 million from a fund used to operate a program in which about 1,500 inmates run farms and make furniture and other goods.

Corrections officials have said tapping the fund, which has a balance of about \$6.5 million, will require them to scale back the program.

*Copyright 2011 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.*



All content © Copyright 2000 - 2011 WorldNow and KTUL. All Rights Reserved.  
For more information on this site, please read our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#).