

Oklahoma Politics News and Articles

National group to help with Oklahoma prison issues

Right on Crime pledges to help legislators come up with solutions to reduce Oklahoma's high incarceration rates and increase rehabilitation programs.

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A nationwide campaign that develops solutions to prison overcrowding will work with Oklahoma's lawmakers on proposals, it was announced Tuesday.

Right on Crime's suggestions can help reduce state spending and incarceration rates, House Speaker Kris Steele said.

Oklahoma has the highest female incarceration rate in the country and ranks in the top five among male prisoners. It costs \$40 a day to keep a female inmate in prison, or \$40 for 13 days when she is on probation or parole, he said.

Ideas by the group, which will also be working with the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, a conservative think tank, will build on proposals working their way through this year's session, said Steele, R-Shawnee. The House on Tuesday approved a measure by Steele that would stress community sentencing programs and limit the governor's role in the parole process for nonviolent offenders.

Legislators in the past have not embraced such ideas for fear of being considered soft on crime. With Oklahoma's prisons at 99 percent occupancy, Steele said, the state must take a different approach.

“When it comes to those individuals that are dangerous or pose a threat to society in general, those individuals ought to be locked up. Public safety is first and foremost in everything that we're talking about here,” he said. “But ultimately, if we don't do something different, there's not going to be a place to house the dangerous criminals.”

Mark Levin, with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said states can save millions by increasing rehabilitation programs, which often are more effective than incarceration. To avoid a \$2 billion cost for new prisons, Texas lawmakers in 2007 adopted a \$241 million plan to expand the capacity of alternative supervision and treatment programs; today, Texas has 7,000 fewer inmates than originally estimated if no policy changes were enacted, and the state's crime rate is the lowest since 1973.



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