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State Budget Crises Push Sentencing Reforms

State budget crises force Republicans to alter tough-on-crime stance, push sentencing reforms


BY GREG BLUESTEIN ASSOCIATED PRESS
ATLANTA April 2, 2011 (AP)

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As costs to house state inmates have soared in recent years, many conservatives are reconsidering a tough-on-crime era that has led to stiffer sentences, overcrowded prisons and bloated corrections budgets.



A prisoner carries a mattress as he moves through the state prison Thursday, March 3, 2011 in... 

Ongoing budget deficits and steep drops in tax revenue in most states are forcing the issue, with law-and-order Republican governors and state legislators beginning to overhaul years of policies that were designed to lock up more criminals and put them away for longer periods of time.

"There has been a dramatic shift in the political landscape on this issue in the last few years," said Adam Gelb, director of the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States. "Conservatives have led the charge for more prisons and

tougher sentencing, but now they realize they need to be just as tough on criminal justice spending."

Most of the proposals circulating in at least 22 state Capitols would not affect current state prisoners, but only future offenders.

Republican governors and lawmakers pushed for many of the policies that put low-level drug offenders and nonviolent felons behind bars and extended sentences for many convicted criminals. But with the GOP in control of more financially strapped state governments, a growing number of Republican elected officials favor a review of the sentencing laws that contributed to a fourfold increase in prison costs over two decades.

The total cost of incarcerating state inmates swelled from \$12 billion in 1988 to more than \$50 billion by 2008.

Newly elected Republican governors in Florida and Georgia are among those pushing sentencing reforms. Brent Steele, a

Republican state senator in Indiana, concedes that lawmakers share the blame for driving up state prison costs in recent years. High-profile crimes prompt lawmakers and governors to adopt ever-tougher criminal sentencing, such as three-strikes laws that impose minimum mandatory sentences for those convicted of a third felony, no matter the offense.

"But with that eventually comes the time when we run out of prison space," said Steele, who is sponsoring a criminal justice overhaul in his state, prompted by budget concerns. "So what do you

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do? You concentrate on incarcerating those we're afraid of and not those we're just mad at."

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