

Texas prison system budget cuts stir up concerns

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Prison experts are warning that only so much fat can be cut before a relatively peaceful prison system boils up into a dangerous stew of discontent.

State officials are carving as many dollars as possible from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice budget as they fight to close a \$23 billion two-year state shortfall without raising taxes.

Although the full extent of the cuts at TDJC won't be known for some time, the department has already slashed \$40 million from its current budget. This week, the House Corrections Committee listened to ideas to trim almost \$14 million more.

Rep. Jerry Madden, chairman of the committee, said he knows the cuts are distasteful to some, but legislators are retaining as many services as they can.

"The concerns are legitimate," the [Richardson Republican](#) said, but because of the budget shortfall, "we had to do something."

Criminal justice experts, inmate advocates and correctional officer representatives say good prison conditions help keep order in the system, and programs that may seem wasteful to some are helpful in inmate rehabilitation.

Cutting inmate "amenities" such as food, education and rehabilitation programs is a "very short-sighted idea," said Robert Worley, criminal justice professor at Texas A&M Central Texas.

"You're going to have all kinds of collateral consequences that, I think, will be more costly for the prison system in the long run," he said.

Worley, himself a prison guard for seven years, said the danger is that angry inmates are less cooperative, leading to more "use of force" incidents.

Texas prisons have been relatively calm in recent years, but riots or brawls have occurred in federal and local facilities over seemingly mundane items such as food, health care or television access.

"There is a point, when you take away enough, the inmates are going to act out and take it out on correctional staff," said Brian Olsen, executive director of the Huntsville chapter of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents correctional officers. He also used to be a prison guard.

Vikrant Reddy, policy analyst for the Center for Effective Justice at the Texas Public Foundation, a conservative think tank, said he doesn't think public safety will be compromised.

"You can reach the point where a criminal justice system has been stripped down to the bone and beyond that you're chipping away at the bone. But I don't think we're there yet," he said. "I think we can still cut and we'll end up spending less, and we have superior public safety."

Small changes

Inmates notice even small changes such as substituting white bread for hamburger buns or reducing desserts from twice a week to once. "If you do anything to manipulate their environment, ... you can almost automatically see some sort of a reaction," Worley said.

Cuts already made include switching powdered milk for fresh in the chow hall. The House is considering charging inmates for over-the-counter drugs, and levying a \$100 annual fee for health care instead of the current \$3 co-payment.

The department's decision to save \$2.8 million by "modifying" inmate meals could create dissension. "An inmate that is well fed and happy can be one that's easier to manage," Worley said.

One proposal that could please inmates is to double the amount of time they may make collect phone calls. But the Legislature is considering that move to generate revenue — not to pacify prisoners.

Turnover concerns

Angry inmates could be more dangerous to staffers demoralized by low salaries and benefit cuts, Olsen said.

Texas ranks near the bottom in officer pay, Olsen said, and raising insurance rates and other benefits costs is on the table. The department recently announced that housing, which had been free to some correctional employees, will now cost at least 20 percent of fair market value.

Such cuts are "a morale issue," Olsen said. "And that means the turnover rates are going to become higher."

Worley doesn't expect high turnover in the weak economy.

"They're going to be some of the highest quality guards that have ever been hired," he said. "You're going to have people with college degrees that can't find jobs — they're going to be correctional officers."

Legislators don't expect the number of inmates to rise, because the prison population is not expected to grow. The parole door may open wider, and cheaper diversionary programs are expected to be used more often, keeping prisoner numbers down. The budget pending in the House calls for closing one prison near Sugar Land.

But TDCJ already has announced the loss of 400 full-time jobs in support personnel. And fewer support staffers affects officers, Olsen said because those people "make the officer's life easier."

Education cutbacks

A contented prison staff is critical to the inmates' well-being, said Susan Fenner, executive director of the Texas Inmate Families Association.

"They are the people that really deal with our loved ones, one-to-one, and we get pretty much what we pay for," she said.

Fenner, who has a son in prison, is particularly concerned about education cutbacks. Her son has earned an associate degree and hoped to continue studying to "keep your sanity and to not waste your brain." But further higher education may not be possible under the proposed cuts.

Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, said she understands the need for educating inmates, but she wants a more effective school system than the one currently in place. And she can't justify paying for college for inmates who rarely reimburse the state after release.

"That's like scholarships for these students. We're sitting here in the free world with less and less money to pay for our scholarships. ... That does bother me."

Fenner also worries about reductions in rehabilitation programs: TDCJ has already cut 155 full-time jobs from Project RIO, a re-entry program for offenders.

Despite the general public's desire to lock 'em up and throw away the key, Fenner pointed out most inmates "are going to be getting out and they are going to be people's neighbors. And people need to start thinking about what kind of a person do you want coming out and back to the neighborhood?"

Many money-saving changes are being considered by lawmakers for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Others have already been implemented. Among changes already made and how much they saved:

About 550 layoffs: **\$4.6 million**

Canceled treatment facility: **\$12 million**

Not replacing equipment: **\$7.1 million**

Improved information technology practices: **\$3.9 million**

Cut unused treatment program funding: **\$3.7 million**

Staffers' housing: Correctional officers are also being charged at least 20 percent of fair market value for prison housing. Some housing had been free.

On the table

Close the Central Prison Unit near Sugar Land.

Raise employee health insurance costs.

Cut education and vocational programs for inmates.

Reduce substance abuse and mental health programs.

Charge inmates with money in commissary accounts \$100 a year for health care.

Reduce prison release "pocket money" from \$100 to \$50.

Charge inmates for over-the-counter medications such as aspirin.

Charge correctional officers when they eat more than two meals per shift in the prison chow hall.