

Connecticut's Prison Budget Is Incentive for Change

Stan Simpson

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Every few months, Leroy Gardner drops me a line. The return address on the envelope reads: Ellis MacDougall Correctional Institution Suffield, CT.

Gardner was put back in the pen last August for violating parole. He was picked up after spending weeks in Hartford trying to find a job.

I ran into him one day last year at the Mark Twain branch library on Farmington Avenue. Gardner was fine-tuning a résumé seeking a "bilingual certified medical secretary position," one that would benefit from his "extensive Spanish skills and medical administrative experience."

He was loquacious, well-read and took pride in showing me that one of his writings was published in a book of theological essays. The man had skills and smarts, no question. But he also had an extensive prison history, including a robbery charge, which he blames on a persistent substance-abuse problem.

Gardner's checkered past, however, has limited him over and over again in getting even an obligatory interview.

So, instead, Connecticut taxpayers spend \$32,218 a year teaching him a lesson.

Perhaps you couldn't care less. It's his problem, not yours. Until you realize that the state is projecting a budget deficit of \$8.7 billion over the next two years. And the current \$691 million budget for the Department of Correction's 19,000 inmates will hit \$709 million in 2010. In comparison, in 1985, the prison budget was \$92.4 million for 5,379 inmates.

If the DOC were a stock, it would have made a lot of people millionaires. As job stability goes, working for corrections is up there — 7,000 are employed. Starting salary for a prison guard is about \$40,000. Physicians who work for the agency can earn well over \$300,000.

In a financial crisis, any state department with a \$700 million line item is ripe for a little scrutiny. State Correction Commissioner Theresa Lantz is taking the right approach with a concept that moves past simply warehousing inmates to one that prepares them for successful re-entry to their communities.

I've always thought a novel concept would be to simply reinvest the \$700 million and turn the prisons into educational and substance abuse counseling centers. The hard cores would still be on lock down, but even they would be provided education, job training and life counseling.

Three-quarters of the prison population are high school dropouts; 85 percent have some sort of drug or alcohol abuse problem. A large chunk of those who come back for a return visit do so because they violated parole or probation. Many times, it's a failed drug test.

I haven't always been a proponent of drug decriminalization, but I'm softening. I moderated a forum a few weeks back at Central Connecticut State University on the topic. Some of that stuff, particularly when it comes to decriminalizing and even sanctioning the sale and taxing of marijuana, is worth a discussion.

Over the last two decades, Connecticut has had a Jekyll-and-Hyde approach to its prison system. The mentality has moved from lock-'em-up-and-build more prisons to prison diversion to — thanks to the

Cheshire slayings — a renewed lock-em-up mentality. Now the state is back to giving a little more weight to prison alternatives.

According to correction department spokesman Brian Garnett, in the late 1990s the state projected the inmate population to be about 22,000.

So, even though the annual budget is eye-popping, it could be worse.

I don't know whether Leroy James Gardner still has a substance-abuse issue. I know he had an employment problem. The man desperately wanted to find work.

Instead, he wound up back in a cell — with plenty of time for his writing.

•Stan Simpson's column appears on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Read his blog at courant.com/stan.

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