



OHIO'S PRISONS ARE IN A DANGEROUS JAM

Editorial

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If Ohio hopes to drive down dangerous overcrowding in its prisons, state and local officials have to use every tool at their disposal immediately. ¶ Officials have been trying the right approaches with new diversion and early-release programs, but change is not happening fast enough, especially in small counties. ¶ This is not being soft on crime. It's being smart on crime and punishment. ¶ Prison is a necessity. Some people have committed crimes so horrendous that they deserve to be locked up for life or at least for many years.

However, Ohio can't afford the tendency to toss every criminal offender — even nonviolent ones — behind bars. That often winds up just making many of them more hardened and less open to rehabilitation.

Yet this trend seems hard to reverse as drug convictions and low-level offenses soar — suggesting reforms are also needed in how county prosecutors and courts mete out justice.

Ohio's prisons now are so overcrowded — they currently house 50,526 inmates, projected to reach 51,601 by June 30, far above their capacity of 38,500 — that inmates and guards may be in danger.

That's a warning sign that Ohio has to move quickly to reduce its prison population.

Already, there are signs of trouble — five inmate homicides and 10 suicides last year, according to Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction spokeswoman Ricky Seyfang. That was the most inmate suicides since 2007.

Meanwhile, the number of prison staff hospitalized because of assaults by inmates doubled in 2012, according to the Dayton Daily News.

Federal courts take a dim view of packing inmates in like sardines. California and other states are fighting an order to release

some low-level offenders to reduce crowding — a scenario that Ohio should avoid at all costs if it hopes to keep control over its prison system and protect the safety of communities.

Refreshingly, Gary Mohr, Ohio's corrections director, has come up with some innovative solutions that focus on rehabilitation.

He's willing to reopen mothballed prison wings to relieve crowding, but he's dead set against building new prisons, because he thinks they are not cost-effective.

Instead, he has created reintegration units that offer select inmates jobs and classes to prepare them for the real world.

He also wants to encourage judges to release nonviolent felons who have served 80 percent of their sentences and have a good track record in prison, as Ohio law allows. The Ohio Supreme Court should support such an initiative.

Local judges and defense attorneys have a chance to hear Mohr and Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Judge Nancy Margaret Russo talk on Feb. 6 at the Cuyahoga County Justice Center about reintegration and Russo's Re-Entry Court for felons who have been granted early release.

Of course, judicial release gives elected judges, eager to keep their jobs, the willies. Russo has shown that it can be successful if judges work closely with the prison system.

And much more needs to be done to help people in prison and those just getting out. Mohr has called on religious organizations to visit inmates and establish ties

to them, which could be useful once they return to their communities.

But the key is to help people stay out of prison. According to a recent paper by a Case Western Reserve University researcher, local jails often send former inmates with mental health problems back onto the streets with few resources. That sets them up to commit a criminal offense that lands them back in jail or, worse, prison.

One of the sadder problems cited by Ohio prison officials is the tendency of inmates' children to inherit their parents' plight. Mohr said that one in four Ohio inmates has children and that those children are more likely than others to become inmates.

With the right outreach, perhaps Ohio could help keep some of those children from taking up a bunk at Lucasville or Marysville. It's an effort well worth making.

