

Corrections faces big budget deficit

The Standard State Bureau - 12/07/05

The state Corrections Department needs an extra \$11.7 million to pay its bills for the next seven months and will face another budget hole next year, agency officials told lawmakers Tuesday.

Corrections Director Bill Slaughter told the Legislative Finance Committee the agency is running out of money mostly because of a growth in the number of convicts sentenced in Montana. Other factors, like overtime wages spending due to a shortage of correctional officers, also play a role.

The budget hole was anticipated to be as high as \$13.6 million, documents show, but the agency got some money from the governor's office and moved money into other accounts to cover part of the shortfall.

Slaughter said it's impossible to tell at this point exactly how much the agency will need to get through the next fiscal year, which begins next July. He predicted the bill will be "more palatable" than the \$11.7 million needed for this year.

Slaughter also said the shortfall has its roots in 2002 and 2003, when the department slashed rehabilitation programs for convicts to help the state squeak through a budget crisis.

"We paid for that mistake," Slaughter told the committee. "Those offenders who didn't get programming when they were with us before are back."

He said in an interview after the meeting that he told lawmakers now about the predicted shortfall because he wanted them to know as soon as possible about the agency's budget.

The number of Montanans in the correctional system is growing at more than 6 percent a year, Slaughter said. For months, the agency has warned it may have to send inmates out of state if the numbers continue growing.

Slaughter told lawmakers Tuesday he would prefer to avoid that option, in part, he said, because once the inmates leave the state, Montana may not be able to move them back due to a chronic lack of prison space.

The department is in the process of expanding the penal system, largely with private, non-profit contractors who will run new, specialty prisons like 256 new prison beds for the mentally ill and disabled and 120 new beds for a lockdown methamphetamine treatment center.

Additionally, the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge has an 85-bed wing mothballed because it can't hire the staff to open the space.

Not all of the expansion projects are included in the agency's anticipated budget holes, Slaughter told lawmakers.