

## **Montana may ship prisoners elsewhere**

### **Inmate move could relieve overcrowding**

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State corrections officials may move up to 200 Montana prisoners to private lockdowns in Minnesota or Colorado, if current overcrowding in Montana's penal system continues, state Corrections Director Bill Slaughter said Wednesday.

Slaughter told the Corrections Advisory Council he'd rather not move any Montanans out of state, and has no immediate plans to do so.

But the state had 176 prisoners held in county jails Wednesday, waiting for space at the state level. If that figure climbs to 250 to 300, the state will start moving state prisoners to other places, Slaughter said.

"We've packed county jails to the point where they've got to think about dangerous situations of their own right now," he told the 24-member, governor-appointed board. "There are right now over 4,000 felony warrants sitting in sheriff's offices."

County sheriffs can't serve the warrants, he said, because they've got no room in their jails in which to house the accused.

Slaughter said the overcrowding situation is temporary.

The state expects to have room for several hundred more prisoners in Montana opening up relatively soon. Corrections officials will soon ask for bids on a private, non-profit business to run a "special needs" prison that would have room for 256 inmates.

That prison would be for inmates who are elderly, have mental illness or some other condition that makes them more difficult to care for in regular lockdown.

Last month, the state asked for bids on a new, separate methamphetamine-treatment prison with room for 120 prisoners.

In addition, officials are trying to recruit enough new correctional officers at the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge to allow it to open up a wing with room for 84 prisoners. The wing is closed now for lack of staff.

Those new prison cells would eliminate the need to move Montana's inmates elsewhere, Slaughter said.

In the meantime, Slaughter told the panel, Montana's corrections system is walking a tight rope: Just one inmate fight at a county jail or Deer Lodge could tip the system over the breaking point, forcing the state to move prisoners out of state.

If the state puts just 74 more people in county jails, they'll be pushing the county penal system into dangerous territory and would likely have to start moving state inmates elsewhere, he said.

Slaughter said in an interview afterward that it's possible the state won't have to move inmates out of state. But they must have plans in place, he said, in case something happens that requires a sudden out-of-state prisoner transfer.

"The best thing that would happen is we could totally avoid it," he said, "but we have to be realistic."

Slaughter told the panel he is beginning to negotiate back-up plans to move inmates to private prisons in Minnesota or Colorado.

Both prisons are owned by Corrections Corporation of America, the same company that owns Montana's only private prison, the Crossroads Correction Center in Shelby.

He estimated the cost of holding prisoners out-of-state would be similar to what the state is paying to house them at Crossroads, a little more than \$50 a day.

Slaughter also said even the new treatment and special-needs prison will not solve Montana's long-term problem with prisons. The state needs to begin talking about its philosophy on handling crime and punishment for the future, he said.

Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger, chairman of the council, said afterward he's hopeful the state can avoid shipping Montana prisoners away.

"When they're in Montana, they have a support network of family and friends that assist them in their recovery and in their development of new lifestyles," he said. "We send them out of state and they lose that."

He also said he worried that Montana inmates might be exposed to a more nefarious sort of prison life in out-of-state lockdowns.

"We should make every attempt we can to keep Montanans here," he said.