

Treatment the key to low correction costs

IN THE LAST DECADE, Alaska's prison population grew 56 percent. We now spend \$145 million a year incarcerating people, and monitoring them while on probation. Then we pay more for police and courts.

Our courts are overwhelmed, our police are overworked, and our prisons are bursting at the seams.

The problem seems intractable. We can't control costs because we can't keep people from committing crimes. When they do commit crimes, we have little choice—we prosecute and we incarcerate. In these tight budget times, that means that as corrections costs rise, we have less money to spend on things like education, transportation, and economic development.

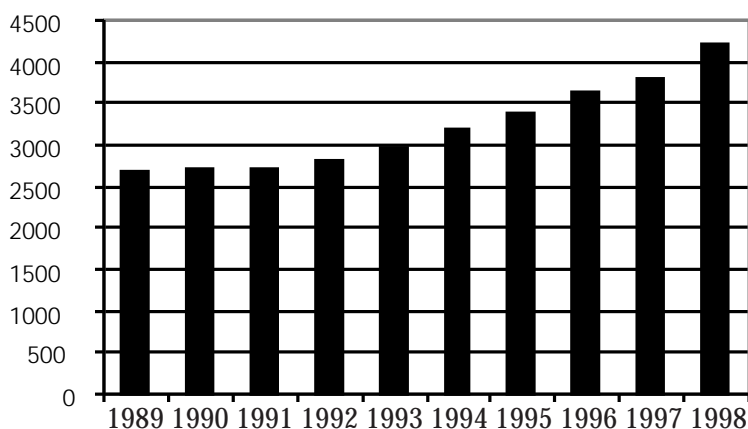
A report released last year by

Columbia University suggests some solutions. "Behind Bars: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population" is the first thorough look at the relationship between drug and alcohol abuse and crime. The relationship is a cozy one. Over 80 percent of inmates were seriously involved with drugs or alcohol at the time of arrest. Of those inmates imprisoned for violent crimes, half were under the influence of drugs or alcohol (or both) when the crime was committed.

Substance abuse also goes hand in hand with recidivism. According to the report, "41 percent of first offenders have used drugs regularly, compared to 63 percent of inmates with two prior convictions and 81

(corrections, cont'd on p. 3)

Alaska's Inmate Population, 1989-1998



source: Department of Corrections

DEC commissioner tells two tales of two cities

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION Commissioner Michele Brown is pulling stakes from Juneau and is heading to Anchorage.

Publicly she cites policy reasons for the move; privately she notes personal reasons. Her "Tale of Two Cities" not only has two cities it has two tales. When I heard about the commissioner's departure, I called and she said personal and family reasons prompted her move. Between that phone call and her press release, she apparently found some policy reasons and forgot to mention the personal reasons.

This isn't the first time DEC's commissioner has thumbled her nose at the capital. Early in the year, she yanked a public information officer position from Juneau to Anchorage, saying she didn't want to make the new hire relocate to Juneau. Her cavalier approach in that instance to the capital creep issue prompted private meetings in my office with every department commissioner to discuss the jobs in Juneau issue.

I discussed with each commissioner the policy and political implications of job transfers. Each commissioner, including Commissioner Brown, said they understood the sensitivity of the issue and committed to brief me prior to final decisions to move jobs. Each commissioner, with the exception of Commissioner Brown, has lived up to that commitment. She is the only cabinet officer in five legislative sessions who told me one thing and then did another.

Her inability to keep commitments may play significantly in her lack of success in the

(two cities, cont'd on p. 2)



(two cities, cont'd from p. 1)

legislative process. I've been stunned by the legislative animus to her department.

I've served on both the House Finance budget subcommittee for DEC and the Senate Finance subcommittee for DEC. Her agency's budget is the only one that many members of the legislature seem to take special glee in short-sheeting. During her tenure as DEC commissioner, the agency's general fund budget has slipped 35 percent. That's a disproportionate share of budget hits.

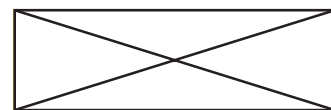
The commissioner's problems with the legislature are reflected in the department. It's an open secret her management style has alienated DEC managers and field employees. One former employee resigned recently because DEC has "gone through five reorganizations within five years" and continued "that is enough for me!" DEC is subject to more union complaints than any other agency. Some of those complaints and morale problems are because of the commissioner's secretive, non-inclusive nature. Top DEC managers did not even know Commissioner Brown was moving to Anchorage until the press release was written.

I'm a long-time proponent of DEC. By inclination, I don't believe nature is an offense against business. I want an agency that helps Alaskans do growth and do it right. I believe the state must regulate environmental issues rather than leave that regulation to federal bureaucrats thousands of miles away. The department's food safety programs, air and water quality programs, and solid waste program are critical.

Because of my support for the agency, I can no longer support the agency's commissioner. The question for the governor is no longer should Michele Brown move to Anchorage but whether or not she should move on to another job.

We need a DEC commissioner who, like the other commissioners, keeps commitments. We need a commissioner who does not turn legislative friends and allies into enemies. We need a commissioner with the stature to inspire trust and confidence in the ranks. And, finally, we need a commissioner who understands Juneau is the capital.

Capitol Undercurrents



A timely reminder

Will Mayo, one of the members of the governor's Commission on Rural Governance and Empowerment, noted at the commission wrap-up meeting June 24, that the challenges facing state leaders on rural issues are dramatic. So dramatic and difficult, he said, that some may be tempted to say we can't do it, or it will take too long. Then the Native leader from Alaska's interior said "whites have the clocks but Indians have the time". It was a rather pointed reminder that the goal shouldn't be to focus on what can be done quickly but the goal instead should be what must be done.

Everything in its place

The legislative auditor position we thought we'd lose to Anchorage is staying in Juneau. Some legislators were making a push to relocate the job to Anchorage but the job will stay in Juneau where most agency policy makers work and reside.

Gender confusion

Once again, I've been invited to the national woman legislators' convention, this year in California. My unisex first name is still causing confusion with the organization (several years ago, I even sent a picture along with my regrets). I've gotten used to getting letters addressed to Ms. Kim Elton, though, and sympathize with the men named Lynn or Robin or Gail and women named Pat or Chris or Morgan. I remember a Juneau Fourth of July years ago when Arliss Sturgelewski was running for governor and had a float in the parade. As she went past on the float waving the parade wave, a fellow in the crowd said to his wife: "I can't believe Arliss sent his wife to Juneau for the parade and didn't come himself."

Important civics lessons

It's one of the things legislators quickly grow to expect: elementary students, as a civics lesson, are encouraged to participate in the legislative process by lobbying for a bill naming a state insect, or fossil. In my first legislative term, the dragonfly was named state insect as the result of a school project in a small interior village. A couple of years ago, Kenai Peninsula students successfully lobbied to name the moose the state mammal. But sometimes, as reported in a magazine published by the National Council of State Legislatures, it can backfire. Seventh graders in Kansas proposed the channel catfish as the state fish. All was going swimmingly, so to speak, until students from two high schools labeled the channel catfish a "scum-sucking bottom dweller" and instead proposed the Topeka shiner, which lives only in clean water. The two student groups were told to work together and reach a compromise. That's a real civics lesson.

Contact Us

Office:

907.465.4947

907.465.2108 FAX

Rm. 504

State Capitol

Juneau, AK 99801

Senator Kim Elton

Senator_Kim_Elton@legis.state.ak.us

Staff:

Dianne Lindback

Dianne_Lindback@legis.state.ak.us

Angie Schmitz

Angie_Schmitz@legis.state.ak.us

(corrections, cont'd from p. 1)

percent of those with five or more convictions.”

We now know something important about a significant majority of the prison population: drug and alcohol abuse is a way of life, substance abuse leads to crime, and substance abusers continue to commit crime after crime.

There are two promising programs that may finally block the endless the cycle of drug abuse and crime. One way is intensive, in-house treatment programs. Another is “drug courts”.

In our prisons we literally have a captive audience. We can use jail time to try to fix some of the underlying causes of crime, or we can release prisoners without treatment and wait for the inevitable—more substance abuse and more crime in our neighborhoods and communities.

While all Alaska prisons offer some form of treatment, most have waiting lists. The most effective—and least available—treatment programs are intensive six month to year-long in-house programs, where the prisoner is in a residential community separate from the rest of the prison population, and the patient is monitored for another six months after release. Last November Alaska started its first program based on this model for women inmates at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in Eagle River. If there's enough funding, Corrections hopes to start a similar program for men.

The results in other states are convincing: a California study found that for every dollar spent on treatment, California citizens saved \$7. Treatment programs need to be only modestly effective to make economic sense. The Columbia study shows that intensive residential treatment, plus vocational training and aftercare monitoring for one prisoner costs about \$6500 above incarceration costs. If just one treated prisoner in ten is successful in kicking the habit and gaining employment, the taxpayer comes out ahead.

For non-violent drug-abusing offenders, many states are finding the best solution is not to send offenders to jail at all. Since the first “drug court” began in Florida ten years ago, over 38 states have followed the drug court model, where court-supervised treatment replaces traditional incarceration. A client in drug court takes part in counseling, court monitoring visits, frequent drug tests, and job training. If the client fails to take positive steps in the program, they're sent to jail. With a 70 percent nationwide graduation rate and a significant reduction in recidivism (5 percent to 28 percent with drug court, compared to 45 percent without), drug courts are showing that we can effectively—and cost-efficiently—use our courts to solve the underlying causes of crime. Alaska is arriving late to the drug court concept, but a recent federal grant will start the ball rolling, with money for planning and training.

Drug courts require some up-front costs for additional attorneys and judges, but future savings could be immense. If we're only half as successful as other states, we could save millions on incarceration, public safety, prosecution, not to mention the social costs of addicted newborns and FAS children.

There may be other ways to save money on corrections—and some lawmakers are convinced the answer is private prisons or fewer prison “frills”. But the savings from these approaches are small at best, and at the end of the sentence, untreated prisoners are still released to our neighborhoods and streets. If treatment means less cost *and* less crime, I'd say it's a wise investment.

on the move

These bills received the Governor's signature this month

HB 34 • Witnessing crimes against children

(Dyson, R-Eagle River) makes it a crime for people who witness a child murder, kidnapping or sexual assault not to report it to the police.

SB 11 • Longer sentences for murderers

(Donley, R-Anch) increases the mandatory minimum prison term for second degree murder from five to ten years.

HB 135 • Undercover cops

(Kott, R-Eagle River) allows police to wear a “wire” or hidden microphone for safety purposes during dangerous investigations, without requiring a warrant, as long as the transmission is not recorded.

HB 167 • Mobile home sales

(Cowdery, R-Anch) repeals a 1997 law requiring mobile home dealers to be licensed and bonded.

SB 8 • Potty parity

(Donley, R-Anch) changes the state plumbing code to increase the minimum number of women's toilets required in auditoriums, convention halls and stadiums built after January 1, 2000.

HB 157 • PFD absences

(Sanders, R-Anch) allows merchant marine sailors who are absent from the state for long periods to qualify for permanent fund dividends.

SB 125 • School safety

(Hoffman, D-Bethel, and Kapsner, D-Bethel) requires every school in each district to develop a model school crisis response plan before July 1, 2000.