

318 2nd Ave. N • Mount Vernon, IA 52314

www.iowapolicyproject.org

FOR RELEASE 1 P.M. CDT, FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 2003

CONTACT: Mike Owen (319) 643-3628
ipp@Lcom.net

Iowa Corrections: Costly and Crowded Study Notes Options to Resolve Budget Impacts of Prison Growth

DES MOINES, Iowa (April 11, 2003) – More discretion on sentencing and greater use of community-based corrections in Iowa would be sensible responses to the challenges caused by greater prison populations and tight budgets, a researcher said today.

“Prisons are a growth industry in Iowa and around the nation,” said Matt De Lisi, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Iowa State University. “Incarceration is expensive, and some sentencing laws may cause longer prison time than necessary for some offenders.

“It makes sense criminologically and economically to allow judges, as well as corrections and parole officials, more discretion in determining the most appropriate supervision.”

In a new report for the Iowa Policy Project, De Lisi and Terry L. Besser, an associate professor in the department, found that legislative mandates have caused more inmates serving longer sentences, meaning greater costs for taxpayers. Some of those costs will be due to more inmates becoming elderly.

“It’s also worth noting that corrections officials project the same type of growth in the number of inmates diagnosed with special-needs as they do for growth in the general prison population by 2011 – and that’s 52 percent over 10 years,” De Lisi said. “Meeting the needs of those inmates already is a challenge for the state.”

David Osterberg, executive director of the Iowa Policy Project, said the report is important as Iowa legislators are dealing with critical budget choices in the final stages of the 2003 session.

“Often when legislators are passing laws, they don’t always think about the budget implications. Getting tough on crime – at least the way legislators have done it – is costly. This report shows there are alternatives that not only protect the public, but that use tax dollars more wisely,” Osterberg said.

Incarceration, the report noted, costs from six to 32 times as much as community corrections, assuming a cost of \$48 per day for each prison inmate – a conservative estimate. Iowa corrections officials recently estimated that cost at about \$54 per day, meaning the contrast may be greater.

The report makes the following recommendations:

- Giving more discretion to the courts, Department of Corrections and Board of Parole to review inmates incarcerated under requirements that they serve at least 85 percent of their sentence. This would allow authorities to assess their suitability for parole or other supervision, such as community-based corrections.

- Encourage use of community-based corrections where appropriate to save costs and improve inmates’ opportunities for a constructive role in the community.

-- more --

- Continue use of eligibility for parole after serving 50 percent of the sentence for certain crimes, and continued allowance of “good time” sentence reductions.
- Examine other states’ practices that emphasize rehabilitation for drug offenders.
- Distinguish between “person” and “non-person” crimes for sentencing, providing judges with discretion to order shorter sentences for property offenders than for violent offenders convicted of the same class felony.
- Continue to focus rehabilitative efforts on offenders who are amenable to treatment. However, transitional treatment should be provided to habitual offenders who tend to serve 100 percent of their sentence.

The Iowa Policy Project is a non-profit, non-partisan research organization headquartered in Mount Vernon, Iowa. The IPP engages scholars at Iowa’s public and private colleges and universities to perform research on issues of importance to the citizens of Iowa. IPP reports are available to the public, free of charge, on the web at www.iowapolicyproject.org.

-- 30 --

For more information, see <http://www.iowapolicyproject.org>.

For interviews with Matt De Lisi or David Osterberg, contact Mike Owen at (319) 643-3628 or ipp@Lcom.net