

# Plan to revive Criminal Justice Policy Council

## House leader asks Perry to sanction move, to give planning assist

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Legislative leaders called Tuesday for Gov. Rick Perry to revive the state Criminal Justice Policy Council, an agency that Perry slashed from the budget and shuttered three years ago, to help Texas plan for its growing population of convicted criminals.

Since the council disappeared, prisons are full again, with almost 152,000 inmates, leading some officials to wonder whether they could have been better prepared.

"There's a lot of information we don't have now that we used to have when the policy council was around," said House Corrections Committee Chairman Jerry Madden, R-Richardson. "We need a study group that will help us better project future growth."

Senate Criminal Justice Committee Chairman John Whitmire, D-Houston, agreed. "We badly need it. Bringing it back is a super idea."

Perry aides were noncommittal.

"The governor is certainly willing to listen to Chairman Madden's ideas on this issue," Perry spokeswoman Kathy Walt said.

In 2003, Perry vetoed the \$1.2 million annual budget for the council in a move touted as necessary to cinch up a bare-bones state budget. Its duties were assumed by the Legislative Budget Board, an arm of the Legislature that provides statistical and budget guidance for lawmakers.

But in the years since, lawmakers have increasingly voiced consternation about a lack of the analyses and planning reports on criminal justice trends that they said were essential to keeping ahead of the prison crowding that plagued Texas two decades ago.

Although the Legislative Budget Board has provided the statistical basics such as prison population numbers and trends, Madden and Whitmire said it has been unable to review and analyze how well specific corrections programs are working and what other programs and initiatives might be needed.

It was in that role that the council's former director, Tony Fabelo, became a well-known Capitol fixture during the past decade.

"The policy council used to have 25 people. The LBB has four. They can't track everything that used to be tracked," Whitmire said. "The LBB people are not criminal justice experts. The council people were."

In a letter to Perry, Madden proposed that the council be reactivated in some form — as a state agency, through a contract with a university or through a "statistical gathering group" — either as a for-profit or nonprofit entity.

Madden wrote: "We could rely on this group for information to guide state policies on such issues as the need for prison construction, criminal sentencing and its impact on prison population, and rehabilitation programs for inmates, probationers and parolees and their effectiveness in reducing recidivism. Without such an agency, we as lawmakers are relying on incomplete information and forecasts."

Whitmire, who said he has not talked to Perry about the proposal, echoed the sentiment. "Many of the good ideas we came up with during the past 10 years (in criminal justice) came from the things the council looked at," he said. "The time is ripe for us to have that kind of information again."

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