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## Legislators want to build lives of inmates to fight reoffenses

**JOSEPH TURNER; The News Tribune**

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If Washington can reduce its repeat criminal offenders, it can avoid building another \$250 million prison by 2020, according to a nonpartisan legislative think tank.

And the prospect of saving that much money has even tough-on-crime Republicans supporting a bill to do more for prison inmates, both while they are serving their sentences and after they are released to communities.

"We are now in a position where we are going to be building prisons or building lives," said Sen. Mike Carrell, R-Lakewood, prime sponsor of a wide-reaching measure aimed at keeping criminals from going back to prison.

Fourteen Republicans and 18 Democrats – nearly two thirds of the state Senate – already have signed on to support Senate Bill 5070.

That measure would require prison officials to assess each of the estimated 10,000 inmates who are sent to prison each year and figure out if they need more schooling, drug treatment or other services to give them the tools they need so they will be less inclined to return to a life of crime.

The bill also would encourage communities to create networks of housing, employment and drug-treatment agencies to help ex-convicts once they get out of prison.

The Washington Public Policy Institute predicts the state prison population will grow by 4,500 inmates over the next 14 years, which would require more than two prisons at a cost of \$250 million apiece.

But one of those prisons can be avoided if the state can reduce the rate of recidivism – ex-convicts who commit more crimes and are sent back. And a second prison can be avoided if the state continues and expands juvenile-offender and early-learning programs aimed at prevention, the institute reported.

SB 5070 deals only with the adult prison population.

"If we can cut recidivism by 20 to 30 percent, that will help," Carrell said. More important, that means fewer people will become crime victims and cities and counties won't have to spend so many of their tax dollars on the criminal justice system, he said.

Washington is like many states reacting to predictions of huge numbers of inmates returning as criminals convicted in the 1980s complete their sentences. Nationwide, 600,000 inmates are expected to be released a year. About 9,000 will be getting out of Washington prisons. Most will be returning home.

Carrell said some provisions of the bill might help lessen the burden on Pierce County, which for years has gotten more than its fair share of inmates getting out of prison. Counties would be encouraged to apply for special state grants to help set up "community transition networks" to provide services to inmates returning to their communities. If counties don't create those networks, they aren't eligible for extra state funding, he said.

County prosecutors and other groups took issue with some provisions in the bill when the Senate Human Services and Corrections Committee held a public hearing Thursday.

Tom McBride, executive director of the Washington Association of Prosecuting Attorneys, said prosecutors don't like the idea of putting inmates into work-release programs a full year before their release. Inmates in work-release centers, such as the three in Tacoma, are only partly supervised because they travel to and from jobs and work in the community.

"I don't want to see someone sentenced to two years never serving any real prison time," McBride said. That could happen if an inmate can earn "good time," which cuts his sentence in half, then spends that one year in work release, he said.

John Woodring, spokesman for the Washington Apartment Association, said his group doesn't oppose the bill, but wondered why it contains a provision that would let someone other than a landlord initiate eviction proceedings.

"Let landlords deal with criminal activities and drug dealing (of tenants), not other tenants," he said.

Tim Boutz, who teaches inmates at the Walla Walla penitentiary, said the bill doesn't go far enough to encourage more college-level classes for inmates. The Legislature outlawed college classes for inmates in 1995 and the new bill does little to restore their eligibility, he said.

He said studies show only 10 percent of inmates with a two-year college degree are rearrested for new crimes, compared to the national average, which is higher than 60 percent.

Sen. Jim Hargrove, D-Hoquiam, committee chairman, said the measure is likely to undergo many changes as it works its way through the

Legislature over the next three months.

"I like to say I'm being tough on crime by preventing it," Hargrove said.

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Highlights of prison bill

- Requires prison officials to develop an "individual re-entry plan" for every offender sent to prison.
- Requires inmates to participate in whatever schooling, training or drug treatment is advised to earn a reduction in their sentence.
- Lets prison officials put inmates in community work-release programs a full year, instead of six months, before their full release.
- Requires a study on the effectiveness of work-release programs.
- Requires prison officials to put ex-convicts back in prison for their third "crime-related" violation of their terms of release.
- Allows fellow tenants or neighbors to seek eviction of a renter who is engaged in criminal activity, if a landlord refuses or fails to do so.
- Requires all counties to conduct an inventory of what services are available for inmates – finding housing, jobs, vocational training and medical assistance.

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