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Panel seeks ways to reduce skyrocketing prison population

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OKLAHOMA CITY — While the Legislature prepares to wrestle with the skyrocketing cost of Oklahoma's prison population next year, a panel of lawmakers and criminal justice experts will meet Thursday to complete its recommendations on the issue.

The Oklahoma Sentencing Commission, a 15-member panel of lawmakers, judges, district attorneys, defense attorneys and victim-rights advocates, is studying ways to reduce the state's growing prison population including structured sentencing for drug offenders, limiting the length of revoked sentences and removing the governor from some parole decisions.

Oklahoma currently houses about 24,000 inmates and has the country's fourth-highest incarceration rate. The state spends more than \$400 million each year on corrections and is seeking an additional \$47 million to finish the current fiscal year and an extra \$150 million next year, said K.C. Moon, executive director of the Criminal Justice Resource Center.

"It's a particularly ripe time for the Legislature to consider options other than just spending more money," Moon said. "It's a time when the straw might break the camel's back as far as somebody deciding if there's an option to building another prison."

The structured sentencing option, which is used in Kansas, would limit the sentencing ranges judges have for various offenses. Under current law in Oklahoma, a person convicted of a second offense of drug possession could be sentenced to between 2 and 20 years in prison. A third offense can bring a sentence of between 2 years and life in prison.

In Kansas, which has an incarceration rate less than half that of Oklahoma's, a person convicted of drug possession is not recommended for prison until they've had two prior misdemeanors and three prior nonviolent felonies, Moon said.

"Drug possession is driving our prison population. One out of four people checked into prison every year are there for drug possession," Moon said. "In Kansas, they seem to have made a decision that prison is not a cost-effective way of dealing with drug addiction. They're not going to drop the hammer until the fifth time."

Former state Sen. Gerald "Ged" Wright, the governor's appointee to the commission, recently traveled to Kansas to visit with corrections officials there. While he said Kansas has implemented some effective measures to reduce the prison population, Wright said he isn't optimistic about Oklahoma legislators doing the same.

"I spent 16 years in the Senate, and nobody gets re-elected by getting soft on crime," Wright said. "But I don't think sentencing guidelines are being soft on crime."

"I just have my doubts whether we'll get anything done with the makeup of the Legislature the way it is. I hope I'm wrong," he said. The Legislature convenes on Feb. 5.

The commission also will hear from experts on sex offenders who are expected to testify about how an increasing number of those offenders are failing to register with the state because of harsh new restrictions imposed by the Legislature last year. The new law limits how close convicted sex offenders can live to schools, parks, playgrounds and day care centers.

The panel will discuss the possibility of implementing a tiered system that rates sex offenders on the seriousness of their crimes.

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