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Top Stories

Retiring To A Florida Prison

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TAMPA – Retiring and growing old in the Sunshine State is a dream for many thousands of people across the country and the world. Florida is, as often described, a Mecca for retirees.

But from the viewpoint of the Florida Department of Corrections that dream may well be considered a nightmare. According to statistics, the FDOC is being hit with a double whammy: An aging prison population coupled with a dramatic increase in the admission of elderly prisoners. In the end, that is a trend that will cost everyone in the state.

On one side of the coin is an aging prison population. New and tougher sentencing guidelines and “three strikes you’re out” laws have meant that more prisoners will remain incarcerated for long periods, if not for life.

In a 2004 article, Ron Word of the *Naples Daily News* interviewed Dennis Whitney, a 61-year-old prisoner who had been incarcerated for 44 years. Whitney was convicted in 1960 for the murder of seven people. He was eligible for parole after serving 30 years of his sentence but had been turned down. Up for a parole hearing shortly after the interview, he was quoted as saying, “If they turn me down, I’m just going to let the state take care of me the rest of my life. I’m well fed, well clothed and well taken care of.”

And that is just what he did. Whitney died a prisoner in 2005.

In 1996, there were 3,715 prisoners age 50 and up that accounted for 5.8 percent of the population incarcerated in Florida prisons. By 2006, that number had ballooned to 11,178 prisoners making up 12.6% of the population. Put another way, the number of elderly prisoners had increased nearly 300 percent during a time in which the general prison population had increased by 38 percent.

And it’s not just that prisoners are staying longer and growing older in jail. On the other side of the coin is a dramatic increase in new prisoners fueled by an apparent rise in violent and sexually related crimes committed by the elderly. In 1996, the Florida Department of Corrections admitted 803 new inmates over the age of 50. In 2006, there were more than 2,600 new inmates over 50. Again, those numbers represent a more than three-fold increase over the past decade.

According to statistics available from the FDOC, the majority of those prisoners are in for murder or sex crimes. In other words, many of them will likely do as Dennis Whitney did – grow older and die in prison. And during his time in prison, the state, by necessity, also provided medical care including at least two angioplasties.



A sign at the Morgan Street Jail welcomes visitors from Sun City Center to a facility tour. Ironically, the elderly are among the fastest growing population of prisoners in Florida and are creating new demands for the Department of Corrections budget. Mitch Traphagen Photo

For the FDOC, the trend presents challenges in caring for an increasingly elderly prison population. Florida is among a number of states that have created special units to house elderly inmates. The units were created primarily to help reduce the increased medical costs associated with elderly prisoners through consolidation of the population.

Elderly prisoners, like many elderly people, suffer from cancer, diabetes, heart disease and other maladies to a greater degree than that of younger people. In Florida prisons, diabetes, hypertension and emphysema are three chronic problems for prisoners over the age of 50. As a result, the health care costs for those prisoners are higher than those of younger prisoners.

A study by the Florida Corrections Commission found that in 2003, when the elderly accounted for one-tenth of the prison population, they comprised more than 25 percent of all hospital costs. Today, just four years later, the elderly population is even larger – and their medical demands are likely greater.

The efforts by the FDOC appear to have been successful as the health care budget per inmate / per day have increased only 30 percent over the past 10 years. The demands on that budget, however, will apparently only grow in the coming years as the elderly prison population also increases. For the FDOC, the ironic phrase, “robbing Peter to pay Paul,” presents a difficult scenario. As medical care encroaches further into the department budget, a growing general prison population does not allow for a reduction in security costs. That, of course, is simply a public safety issue.

In this case, Peter simply does not have the money.

Florida is known around the world as a retirement paradise. But for a growing number of elderly people, “paradise” will be realized behind the cold, steel bars of a Florida prison. And for that, the taxpayers will increasingly foot the bill.

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