

Date: April 1, 2011

To: The Honorable Terry Barnard
Chair, State Institutions and Property

From: Faith Lyles, Constituent

Subject: Alternatives to Incarceration: Decreasing Prison and Health Care Costs

Background

Georgia is the fourth-highest incarcerator in the nation. Approximately “1 in 13 Georgians are either behind bars, on probation, or are on parole.” Currently, the Georgia Department of Corrections manages 48,741 inmates in 40 state-operated and 3 private facilities. It is costing Georgia taxpayers an astounding \$1 billion per year to house these inmates – \$49 per day and \$20,516 per prisoner. State budgets have become smaller but the cost of corrections has continued to rise because of healthcare costs. In his inaugural speech, Governor Deal stated that his first agenda item would be to reform Georgia's prison system, in order to save money.

The United States Constitution mandates that states provide “reasonable levels of care” to all inmates, which includes providing healthcare. Thus, rising healthcare in prisons is straining already tight state budgets. Factors contributing to these costs include the rise in the prison population due to stricter mandatory sentences (e.g., “war on drugs”) and aging prisoners. As of 2000, 8.2 percent of all inmates were over the age of 50 making them the fastest growing population in prison. For inmates over 65, Georgia spends approximately \$8,500 on medical costs (\$950 per younger inmates) for treatment of geriatric illnesses such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Other prison healthcare costs include treatment for communicable and chronic diseases (HIV, TB, and hepatitis), mental illness, substance abuse and treatment, and prescription drug costs. The rising cost of caring for prisoners has “forced” the issue of prison reform to the top of many states’ agendas – which is leading the efforts to find alternatives to incarceration.

Some states’ alternatives to incarceration include:

- Improving probation and parole programs - to reduce the cost of incarceration. (A Georgia parole costs taxpayers \$4.43 per day.)
- Investing in new halfway houses – to assist recent paroles, drug abusers and the mentally challenged to learn how to live on their own with the general population.
- Creating drug courts for offenders with drug issues and mental health problems. Governor Deal suggested: Day Reporting Centers, Drug, DUI and Mental Health Courts in a May 2010 article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution stated that the state could save \$17.9 million by “shaving a month or two off for a typical offender;”
- Providing early release to terminally ill and elderly inmates; and
- Requiring court mandated educational/life skills classes (similar to traffic court) - to reduce incarceration of nonviolent offenders and to deter them from becoming dangerous felons.

Recommendation:

In an effort to quickly reduce prison and healthcare costs in Georgia, I recommend that the Georgia Department of Corrections invest in these alternatives or develop others that will ultimately save Georgia taxpayers money, which can be invested in other areas (e.g., education.)