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Cut sentences of inmates who choose rehabilitation

Prison costs consume 20 percent of Michigan's general fund budget, a figure that is rising every year. And yet the state has not agreed on a strategy for containing Corrections spending or incarceration rates that are among the highest in the nation.

A new study released by the nonpartisan Citizens Research Council predicts prison spending will increase \$46 million a year during the next four years, reaching \$2.6 billion by 2012.

Michigan must adopt smarter and less expensive strategies for dealing with criminals. One of the best ways to do that is to reward inmates who use their time behind bars to change their lives and make sure the programs are available to help them rehabilitate.

Some legislators have balked at alternatives to prison, fearing they will come across as soft on crime. But raw data show that many of the alternatives have worked and deserve more consideration and support.

About 95 percent of all prisoners will be released eventually. And, according to the U.S. Justice Department, about half will be behind bars again within two years. That's a costly statistic for Michigan, whose incarceration rate ranks 11th highest in the nation.

Michigan would save a significant amount of money if it could convert more prisoners into contributing members of society.

The Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative is doing just that. Only 22 percent of Michigan prisoners who participated in the re-entry program returned to prison within two years, preliminary statistics show.

"With the pilot programs that are in place now, we're seeing a savings of about 400 beds annually," said John Cordell, spokesperson for the Corrections Department.

That ought to be evidence enough that expanding the \$33 million program would be a good investment.

The re-entry program is not an easy way out of prison time. Participants must find a home and job and treat their addictions and mental illnesses. They must cooperate with parole officers, community members and mentors. It's a strenuous process, start to finish.

But in the end, the re-entry program saves Michigan money and restores lives. The re-entry program costs only \$1,600 per year per offender -- a far cry from the \$30,000 annually it would cost to return them to prison. Michigan should also consider restoring good-time sentence reductions for certain inmates. The state now requires inmates to serve their minimum sentences.

Offering to take time off a sentence for inmates who show good behavior and use their time behind bars to educate themselves and participate in programs aimed at curbing their criminal tendencies might keep more of them from returning to prison.

On average, Michigan prisoners stay incarcerated one year longer than prisoners in other Great Lakes states. In 1999, Michigan abolished the Sentencing Commission, which evaluated how effectively the state's sentencing guidelines were working.

The commission should be restored and charged with examining whether the current sentencing code fits Michigan's needs.

The benefits already gleaned by the re-entry program should be enough to inspire the governor and lawmakers to quickly explore alternatives for protecting Michigan residents without allowing the Corrections' budget to bankrupt the state.