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## Editorial: Time to break prison-spending cycle

It serves no purpose to harp on the fact that the Wisconsin State Legislature and governor wasted early warning signs and missed an opportunity to reform the state's prison system.

The state finds itself in a budget crisis worsened by the uncontrollable explosion of prison costs. The Department of Corrections has become the biggest drain on state resources over the past decade and its growth has gone unchecked with the false promise of getting tough on crime.

With the latest news out of Madison regarding the budgetary crisis, it is unlikely the state will want to deal spend money on the reforms that Wisconsin needs to break the vicious cycle of prison spending gobbling up larger and larger percentages of the state budget.

An analysis by the nonpartisan Council of State Governments Justice Center paints a bleak budgetary picture for Wisconsin corrections policy.

The Justice Center reports that from 1999 to 2009, the corrections budget grew from \$700 million to \$1.2 billion, a 71 percent increase. It projects that without a drastic change in corrections policies, Wisconsin will need \$2.5 billion between 2009 and 2019 to reduce overcrowding and growth in prison population. At the current rate, prison population is expected to grow from 22,500 to 28,019 in 2019.

Given the needs of public schools, the state university system and health care costs, it is unconscionable Wisconsin continues pouring that amount of money into the prison system with no end in sight.

Let's be clear: The lock 'em up and throw away the key mentality is a monster created by Republicans championed by former Gov. Tommy Thompson. Truth-in-sentencing mandates by the legislature led to longer incarcerations and the ensuing prison-building spree guaranteed that spending would become uncontrolled.

A legislative committee released a package of bills last week to address the prison problem but the \$30 million price tag was quickly deemed unaffordable the next day when the governor announced the state's budget deficit was \$1.6 billion larger than anticipated due to a dramatic drop in tax revenue.

The Justice Center reports that between 2000 and 2007, the number of admissions for people who failed on community supervision increased 40 percent while the number entering prison for new offenses decreased 11 percent. The data suggests that the state invest in post sentence, post parole programs to reduce recidivism.

The Justice Center points to effective programs in Texas and Kansas that re-invested prison dollars into alcohol and drug abuse treatment centers and programs to identify and rehabilitate prisoners at high risk to re-offend or have probation revoked. Those approaches produce results that are measurable.

In Oshkosh, participants at a community forum Monday learned that supportive community groups can

5/15/2009

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help even repeat offenders break old habits and lead new lives. Investing \$30 million in Wisconsin prison reform is smart. It costs the state \$6.68 a day to supervise an offender in the community but \$83.06 a day to keep them locked up. The math is pretty simple. The legislature says it can't afford to invest \$30 million in prison reform. We say the legislature can't afford not to.

The Final Thought: Unless the state takes tough steps to break the cycle of never-ending prison spending increases with new approaches, Wisconsin's fiscal problems will only worsen over time.

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