

# Prison plan targets recidivism, staff morale, overcrowding

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The city prisons commissioner has outlined strategies to reduce prison overcrowding, fight recidivism and improve prison-staff morale in a report made public yesterday.

The strategic plan by Commissioner Louis Giorla was submitted to Mayor Nutter on April 24. Deputy Mayor for Public Safety Everett Gillison said it will serve as a road map for the city as it strives to improve the prison system, which is taxed by a growing population and ballooning costs.

"The idea is to be a little more strategic in what we're trying to do and not just react," Gillison said.

The plan lays out short-term, medium-term and long-term goals for overcrowding, recidivism and staff morale.

Overcrowding is a key problem in the prison system. According to the plan, the current prison population is 9,193, though the city's six jails were built for about 6,400. (A prison study commissioned in September said the population topped 9,300 inmates.)

Just last month 11 inmates filed a class-action lawsuit against the city and the prison commissioner, complaining of "triple-celling," crowding three people into a two-person cell.

The plan says the city needs another 200 to 600 beds immediately. Talks under way to acquire 200 beds outside the city. The city also has a contract with Community Education Centers for a 200-bed facility to be opened in July.

Another strategy is to allow non-violent, non-sex offenders often being held on probation violations to avoid jail by reporting daily to authorities. Gillison said that should start in July. And the city is looking at electronic GPS tracking of some offenders.

Gillison said the city needs to think about "who really needs to be in jail and who can be diverted without getting to jail."

Fighting recidivism will also reduce the prison population, Gillison said. He estimated that 60 percent of prisoners who get released end up back in the system.

The plan says the prisons will enhance the intake process - so that officials know more about the population and how to serve them - as well as the discharge protocol. Giorla also pledges to begin an annual recidivism study starting in June 2009, so the city can better understand what programs and services work.

On the staffing side, the report notes that prison employees have the second highest use of sick time in the city - perhaps as the result of forced overtime and difficult work schedules.

The plan says the prisons hope to work with the unions to change schedules to allow shorter tours of duty. It also says the city is looking at proposals for educational assistance for staff.

William DiMascio, executive director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, a prisoner advocacy group, praised the overall direction of the plan, but questioned the proposal to move some prisoners outside the city.

"We still have concerns regarding shipping prisoners out of jurisdictions where they will be further away from their families and will not have access to appropriate programs," he said. \*