

Prison Safety and Population Increases Need Legislative Attention

Written by Jon Erpenbach Press. State Senator 27th District
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Sen. Jon Erpenbach of Madison proposes reforms to help our overcrowded, understaffed prisons and the people living with this issue every day.

MADISON - In 2018, the Wisconsin prison population will be as high as it has ever been. This overcrowding is a serious safety concern not only for our front line correctional officers and sergeants but also for inmates and our support staff of teachers, maintenance, administrators, etc. Coupled with an ongoing staffing shortage following normal retirements and Act 10 retirements, it is the perfect storm for serious situations in our institutions. Assaults on staff by inmates, inmate to inmate assaults, and in Lincoln Hills an eruption of difficult and dangerous situations with staff and inmates raise red flags.



As a Legislature, we have a responsibility to explore ways we can address this issue in the

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short term and in the long term. With a set of nine bills I have introduced this session with Representative Dave Considine, we are working to solve some of the problems we know officers and inmates are facing. It is not the end all be all to solve this problem, but it is a first step.

This group of bills ensures new officers have at least four weeks supervised training inside the institution in training before they can work alone on a unit with 70 inmates. Being short staffed often means “collapsing positions”, leaving them open if deemed non-essential. Unfortunately that means if there is incident, units need to be put in lockdown before back-up support can come; five trained staff designated as “first responders” should be in working at all times in our maximum security institutions. No officer can work more than two 16 hour days in a row safely; multiple days of overtime should be capped in law and not at the whim of who is in charge.

Our guard towers should have at least one officer in them at all times for community safety and to monitor for drones and other methods of contraband drop. Records detailing problem incidents between inmates and staff should be open records and released easily to the public and families; specifying these are open and subject to release takes the staff judgement out of that decision. Lots of medication is dispersed at our correctional institutions by officers who have little training; our bill requires training every year on medication. Finally, as we recently saw in Lincoln Hills and witnessed with a serious attack on a librarian at Columbia Correctional Institution, non-officer staff working in our correctional facilities are at risk as well. An officer should be present when dangerous inmates interact with civilian staff.

I am hopeful these reforms, or at least something, will happen in the Legislature to help our overcrowded, understaffed prisons and the people living with this issue every day. However, without even one single Republican brave enough to sign on to these bills, I am doubtful they will move with the current Republican control of the Legislature. I remain ready, as I have always operated, to work with any Legislator willing to try to solve Wisconsin’s public policy challenges.

For more information on these proposals or the Legislative oversight of the Department of Corrections, please contact my office at 608-266-6670 or 888-549-0027 or sen.erpenbach@legis.wi.gov