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Pennsylvania is spending over \$400 million to build two prisons in Montgomery County and the Department of Corrections is asking for an additional \$68 million in the 2013-2014 budget even while the prison population is decreasing. In the last two years, the state has cut over \$1 billion from education and millions more from healthcare and social services. We believe that the state should be funding education and healthcare, not more prison beds. We are asking the members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly to:

- Refuse to pass any budget with increased DOC funding as long as the Department continues to waste taxpayer money on unnecessary new prisons;
- Cancel the prison construction in Montgomery County;
- Enact legislation instituting a moratorium on new prison construction.

We believe that legislators should be focusing on reducing corrections spending by taking sensible, research-backed approaches to shrinking the prison population. Taking steps such as repealing mandatory minimum laws can actually enhance public safety AND free up funds to spend on positive programs that reduce incarceration rates, such as quality public education, job training, healthcare, and drug and alcohol treatment.

In this packet you will find:

- Information on why this prison construction is wasteful and unnecessary,
- Information on how to effectively reduce the prison population,
- Studies and research supporting these positions,
- Information on Decarcerate PA and our statewide movement to stop the prison expansion.

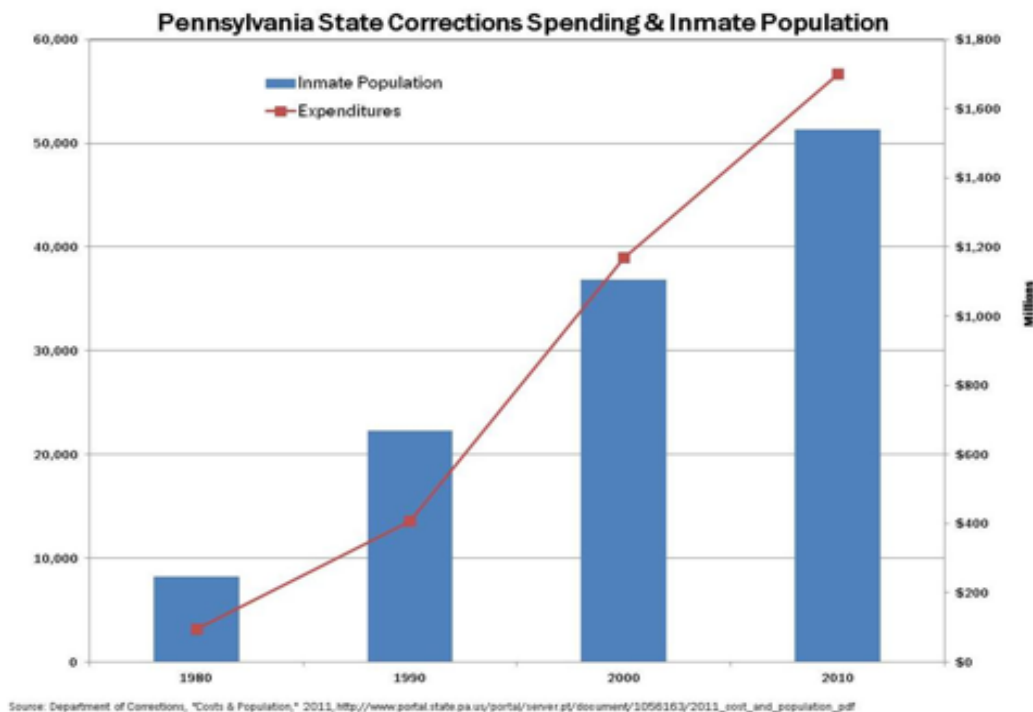
Thank you for taking the time to review this information. As constituents in the state of Pennsylvania, we trust that we can count on you to do what's right for the state and put a stop to this unnecessary and wasteful prison construction. We look forward to your support.



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Why Building Prisons is Bad for Pennsylvania

Since 1980, the number of men and women incarcerated in Pennsylvania state prisons has gone from 8,243 to over 51,000. Corrections costs have increased at an even faster rate, with the Department of Corrections budget increasing at six times the rate of spending on basic education. Governor Corbett's proposed 2013-2014 budget includes almost \$2 billion for the DOC. Billions of dollars have been spent on new prison construction, and over the last three decades nineteen new state prisons have been built. But mass incarceration is not making Pennsylvania any safer.



This graph shows the dramatic increase in the prison population and the DOC budget over the last 30 years. This increase is largely due to changes in sentencing policy, NOT an increase in crime rates. Policies such as mandatory minimums, life without the possibility of parole, and the "war on drugs" have fueled this explosive growth.

Despite the fact that prison expansion has not been good for Pennsylvania, the Department of Corrections has just started

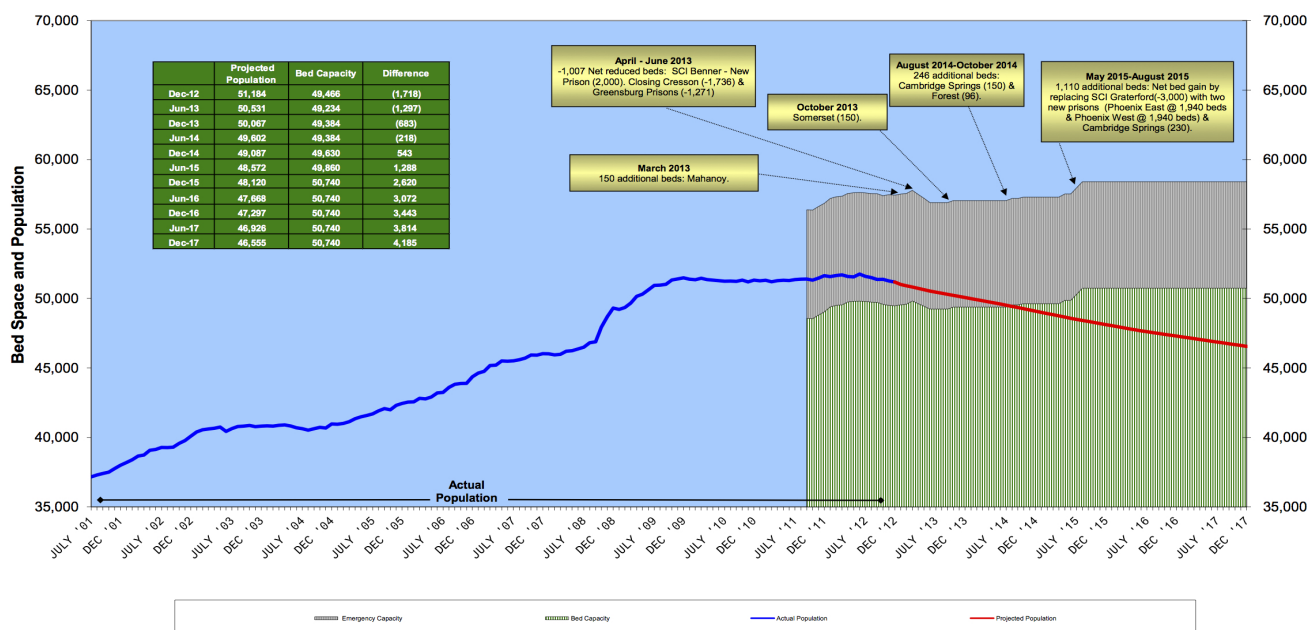
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construction on SCI Phoenix I and II on the grounds of SCI Graterford in Montgomery County. The construction of SCI Phoenix I and II is unnecessary and a waste of taxpayer money. The construction must be canceled and common sense policies that reduce the prison population must be implemented.

- **There is no justification for continuing to build expensive new prisons while the prison population is going down.**

According to Department of Corrections Secretary John Wetzel, the prison population is finally starting to decrease,¹ thanks in part to bipartisan reforms signed into law by Governor Corbett this past year. Recently the Department of Corrections announced that it would be closing two prisons in Westmoreland and Cambria Counties to justify opening a newly built 2000 bed facility in Centre County. The state is wasting over \$400 million of taxpayer money during a time of massive budget cuts to education and other social services.

Department of Corrections - Population vs. Bed Space (January 9, 2013)



Department of Corrections
Bureau of Planning, Research and Statistics

1/15/2013

The above graph, taken from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' website, clearly shows that we do not need new prison beds in Pennsylvania. According to the DOC's projections, by 2017 we will have approximately 5000 empty prison beds. This is in addition to the existing empty facilities of SCI Cresson and Greensburg, which will cost approximately \$5 million annually to

¹ See the Department of Corrections Press Release from Jan. 4, 2013, "Corrections Population Decrease is Largest One-Year Drop Since 1971": <http://www.cor.state.pa.us/>

maintain as empty buildings, plus the 3300-bed SCI Graterford which the Department claims it will mothball once SCI Phoenix I & II are complete.

There is absolutely no reason to be spending millions of dollars on new prison beds when the DOC's own data indicate that these beds are unnecessary.

- **SCI Phoenix I and II will expand the prison system.** The Department of Corrections claims that SCI Phoenix I and II are “replacement facilities” for the existing Graterford. But Phoenix I and II will have a 4100-bed capacity, meaning the “replacement facility” has almost 1,000 more beds than SCI Graterford. It is irresponsible and wasteful to grow the state prison system at a time when the prison population is projected to decrease. Phoenix I and II must be cancelled and the money reallocated.
- **There is no guarantee that the old SCI Graterford will be closed.** Despite Secretary Wetzel’s assertion that Phoenix I and II are replacement facilities he will not commit to decommissioning SCI Graterford. In fact in this year’s budget \$1.3 million is earmarked to replace part of the roof on the existing Graterford. This is further evidence that either the DOC is not spending money wisely or they are not serious about closing Graterford. In 2003, the DOC built a new prison in Fayette County to “replace” SCI Pittsburgh. The DOC claimed that the Pittsburgh prison needed to be shut down because it was too old and decrepit to fix. But in 2007, the DOC reopened SCI Pittsburgh to address overcrowding. Now SCI Pittsburgh—embroiled in lawsuits alleging rampant sexual and physical of prisoners—and SCI Fayette are both filled to capacity. DOC press spokesperson Sue McNaughton has admitted that the existing Graterford will be used to relieve temporary overcrowding in the prison system.
- **The existing SCI Graterford could be renovated at a fraction of the cost.** According DOC Secretary John Wetzel, it would cost only \$50 million to renovate the existing Graterford prison, yet it is costing over \$400 million to replace with two new facilities, SCI Phoenix I and II. While Secretary Wetzel has refused to release the study these numbers came from, even the Department admits that the state would save over \$350 million simply by renovating the building. Wetzel predicts the new facility will be cheaper to operate in the long run, but these “cost savings” largely come from having a lower staff-to-prisoner ratio, not because of efficiencies in the building itself. If the state really wanted to increase the prison’s efficiency, it would

rehabilitate the existing facility and work toward shrinking the prison population further and permanently closing other facilities.

- **New prisons are not good for incarcerated men and women.** Decarcerate PA has been in communication with many individuals and organizations within Graterford. Everyone we have spoken to is against the expansion of the prison system. While the Department of Corrections could and should take immediate steps to improve conditions within Graterford, building more prisons is not the answer. The men at Graterford have made it clear: they do not want these new prisons built. To help men and women in prison, to help the families and communities that they come from, the Department of Corrections should spend more time and resources working to improve the conditions inside facilities and to ease the burdens of re-entering society after a conviction. Building newer or bigger prisons only adds to the problems we face.
- **Prisons are not good for rural economies.** Prisons have been sold to cash-strapped rural communities as a source of good jobs and a stable economy. But research has shown that prisons do not live up to their economic promise.² Additionally, if the DOC is serious about closing prisons, counties who grew dependent on prison jobs and spent millions of dollars on local infrastructure to support the prisons could find themselves out of luck. In January, the Corbett administration announced the closure of SCI Cresson in Cambria County and SCI Greensburg in Westmoreland County. Many local residents lost access to jobs in the area, and Westmoreland County may be left with an expensive steam plant they had recently built specifically to accommodate the needs of the prison.³ Instead of investing in the prison industry, which creates jobs out of human suffering, Pennsylvania should be looking for positive, sustainable alternatives for economic stability.
- **Prison construction is bad for the environment.** The construction in Montgomery County threatens the local ecosystem (including the surrounding wetlands, home to nesting bald eagles), and new prisons will further pollute the water system and depress the economy—all at taxpayer expense. If the state really wanted to increase the prison's efficiency, it would

² See this summary of research on the relation of prisons to local economies and employment growth:
http://realcostofprisons.org/materials/dont_build_it_here.pdf

³ See transcripts from the Judiciary Committee's Crime and Corrections Hearing on Wednesday, February 13th, 2013:
http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/tr/transcripts/2013_0002T.pdf

rehabilitate the existing facility and work toward permanently closing other facilities. Yet the DOC refuses to do this.

· **Our children cannot afford to pay for these prisons.**

Capital projects like the prison expansions are being funded through General Obligation Bonds, which means they are being funded with borrowed money. **Not only are we spending \$400 million on prison construction, but we will actually spend significantly more than that because we will be paying back that \$400 million with interest.** The money to pay back Pennsylvania's debt comes out of the general fund, which means it is paid for with the same money that could be funding our schools instead. Our children will pay the price of these prisons - not just in this year's budget and next year's budget, but for decades to come. In this year's budget alone, the state is spending almost \$1.2 billion dollars to repay our debt. We are paying now for the prisons that were built in the 90s. And unless we stop this prison expansion, our children will be paying for these prisons for the next twenty years. **SCI Phoenix I and II must be cancelled.**

· **It is not too late to cancel these prisons.** The Department of Corrections claims these projects are too far along in the construction process to be stopped. This is not true. While some of the money is already spent, the foundation for the prison is just now being laid. If the projects were cancelled, the remaining funds could be repurposed for things that Pennsylvania actually needs.

For all these reasons, we are asking you and your colleagues in the General Assembly to demand an immediate cancellation of the prison construction and vote NO on any budget with additional DOC funding as long as the Department continues to build new prisons.



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How to Reduce the Prison Population

There are many policy changes that could help reduce Pennsylvania's prison population. These changes would enhance public safety, cut taxpayer costs, and reunite families and communities.

Repeal Mandatory Minimums. Mandatory minimum sentencing laws require harsh, automatic prison terms for those convicted of certain federal and state crimes. They are fueling prison growth and must be repealed. Mandatory sentencing undermines the ability of judges and juries to determine appropriate sentencing and has drastically increased the prison population. In 2007, the Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing, an entity funded by the state specifically to guide sentencing policy, released a report on the effectiveness of mandatory sentencing.⁴ According to its findings, "neither the length of sentence, nor the imposition of the mandatory sentence per se... was a predictor of recidivism." The Sentencing Commission further recommended the repeal of specific mandatory legislation, including to "Repeal the Drug Free School Zone mandatory legislation, which is irregularly applied and overbroad geographically," meaning that it disproportionately targets urban residents who are much more likely to be within 1000 feet of school property.

According to the same report, Mandatory Minimum Sentences lead to:

- Significant increases in the costs of corrections due to longer prison terms and an increasing prison population;
- Removal from consideration of other sentencing options that may prove to be less costly and/or more effective than mandatory incarceration;
- Impact on all aspects of the criminal justice system, including pleas or verdicts and offender eligibility for rehabilitation programs and early release;
- Limiting the discretion of the sentencing judge.

⁴ See House Resolution 12 of 2007, Use and Impact of Mandatory Minimum Sentences: <http://pcs.la.psu.edu/publications-and-research/research-and-evaluation-reports/special-reports/house-resolution-12-of-2007-use-and-impact-of-mandatory-minimum-sentences/report-to-the-legislature-the-use-and-impact-of-mandatory-minimum-sentences.-hr-12-of-2007/view>

There are many studies both on the state and federal level documenting the ineffectiveness of mandatory sentencing.⁵ The Legislature and the Governor must work to repeal existing mandatory minimum sentences.

Enact Parole Eligibility for people who are over 50 years old and have served over 25 years. Pennsylvania prisons currently house approximately 4,500 people serving life sentences. In Pennsylvania, life means life, with no possibility of parole. In PA, you receive an automatic Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentence if you are convicted of certain crimes, including second-degree murder, even if you were only present at the incident and were not accused of being the person who pulled the trigger. Since these sentencing guidelines are mandatory, the judge has no discretion in sentencing and cannot take into consideration any mitigating circumstances.

Life without parole sentencing is creating a class of geriatric inmates. In part because of the high numbers of people serving LWOP, Pennsylvania currently has over 8,000 elderly people incarcerated in the state prison system. It costs an average of \$42,000 a year to incarcerate someone in PA,⁶ but it costs approximately \$66,000 a year for elderly prisoners.⁷ PA incarcerates the second highest amount of elderly prisoners of any state, with 7.9% of the prison population over the age of 55. But research has shown that by age 50 people are much less likely to be charged with crimes. For example, arrest rates drop to just over 2% at age 50 and are almost 0% at age 65.

Mandatory life without parole sentencing is both immoral and expensive. At a minimum, Decarcerate PA is calling on our legislators to follow the recommendation of the 2005 Joint State Task Force on Aging and Geriatric Prisoners⁸ and mandate parole eligibility for anyone who is over 50 years of age and has been incarcerated for more than 25 years. Life Without Parole sentencing is not making Pennsylvania safer. It is time to give elderly men and women the opportunity to go home to their families and communities.

⁵ See the Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing's Research Bulletin "A Multi-Method Study of Mandatory Minimum Sentences in Pennsylvania"

<http://pcs.la.psu.edu/publications-and-research/research-bulletin/2010-april.-a-multi-method-study-of-mandatory-minimum-sentences-in-pennsylvania/view>

⁶ See the Vera Institute's Report "The Price of Prisons: What Incarceration Costs Taxpayers":
<http://www.vera.org/pubs/price-prisons>

⁷ See the ACLU's Report "At America's Expense: The Mass Incarceration of the Elderly":
<http://www.aclu.org/criminal-law-reform/americas-expense-mass-incarceration-elderly>

⁸ See the 2005 Joint State Task Force Report on Aging and Geriatric Prisoners:
http://jsg.legis.state.pa.us/publications.cfm?JSPU_PUBLN_ID=40

Treat drug addiction as a public health issue, not a criminal justice issue. Study after study has shown that imprisonment is not an appropriate or effective response to addiction.⁹ Increasing access to treatment programs instead of incarcerating people dealing with addiction will create a healthier state AND a healthier budget. Pennsylvania has 53,633 drug arrests per year, and 17% of Pennsylvania's prison population are incarcerated for drug offenses. One small step that Pennsylvania could take to reduce its participation in the failed war on drugs is to eliminate state prison time as a sentencing option for drug offenses, and instead direct funds for treatment, prevention, and healthcare.

Reinstate the Prerelease Program. The recently passed Criminal Justice Reform Act eliminated Pennsylvania's prerelease program. We believe that this move was short-sighted. Prerelease programs allow certain qualifying prisoners to return to their families and communities sooner, and instead of eliminating these programs the state should be expanding access to them.

Stop incarcerating technical parole violators. While the Criminal Justice Reform Act (Act 122), diverted some Technical Parole Violators from the state prison system, people are still being re-incarcerated in county jails and Community Corrections Centers even when they have not been convicted of a new crime. We believe that this is both disruptive to people's lives and an unnecessary expense for the state. Sending people to Community Corrections Centers merely shifts the cost to different facilities. If a person on parole commits a technical parole violation, which can be something as simple as missing an appointment or changing their address without informing a parole officer, they will still be incarcerated in a CCC. Prior to Act 122, the PA Department of Corrections spent approximately \$97 million annually to incarcerate technical parole violators. The Department predicts that they will save around \$30 million annually¹⁰ on Technical Parole Violators once the Act is fully implemented, but much more could be saved by alternatives to incarceration.

End the practice of automatically trying youth as adults and holding them in adult jails pre-trial. Prior to 1996 the only crime for which youth would be automatically charged as adults was Homicide. Act 33 drastically expanded the range of crimes for which juveniles could be tried as adults and placed in adult prison. This

⁹ See "A 25-Year Quagmire: The War on Drugs and Its Impact on American Society"
http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/dp_25yearquagmire.pdf

¹⁰ See Justice Reinvestment in Pennsylvania: Final Summary and Policy Options for Consideration, available at:
http://www.cor.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/major_initiatives/21262/justice_reinvestment_initiative/1354894

means that young people are held in adult jails, sometimes for many months, even before trial. Youth in an adult jail have a greater chance of victimization and death than youth in a juvenile facility, there is little or no education, mental health treatment or rehabilitative programming for youth in adult prisons, youth tried as adults can be given much longer sentences than in the juvenile system and leave prison with an adult criminal record which will affect their chances to further their education and find a job and increases the likelihood of recidivism. Act 33 is cruel and inappropriate and must be repealed.

End long-term solitary confinement. Long term solitary confinement has no positive value, contributes to and/or causes serious mental health issues, and means that people max out their sentences instead of being released under supervision on parole. This practice must be stopped.

These are just a few of the many policy changes that could reduce Pennsylvania's prison population and save millions of dollars in corrections costs. Savings could then be directed to positive programs that further reduce incarceration rates, like quality public education, jobs and job training, healthcare, food access, housing, and community-based reentry and mediation.

Rural Prisons: The Development of Last Resort

Small Towns With New Prisons Experience Less Economic Growth

Using 1990 and 2000 census data, a national study (Besser & Hanson, 2003) examining the economic impact of state prisons built in the 1990's on small town economies found:

- The rate of increase in the number of new businesses, non-agricultural employment, average household wages, retail sales, median value of owner occupied housing, and total number of new housing units is substantially less in prison towns than in non-prison towns. The only gain found for prison towns vs. non-prison towns was in public sector employment.
- Prison towns lost an average of 33% in population over the decade 1990-2000 while the population in non-prison towns increased an average of 12%.
- Prison towns in the South fared the worst. Between 1990 and 2000, Southern towns with state prisons suffered more than double the population loss experienced by towns without prisons (-41% for prison towns vs. -20% for non-prison towns).
- Among towns with poverty rates higher than 20% in 1990, towns with prisons experienced one third less reduction in poverty by the end of the decade than towns without prisons. By 2000, poverty rates in the towns without prisons had been reduced by 25%, compared to a 7% reduction in towns with prisons.

Prisons Provide Few Long Term Economic Benefits To Their Host Counties

- A recent study (King, Mauer, & Huling, 2003) analyzing income and unemployment data for 14 rural counties — 7 counties had prisons, 7 counties did not — in upstate New York over 25 years found: Residents of rural counties with one or more prisons did not gain employment advantages compared to rural counties without prisons.
- Counties that hosted prisons received no significant advantage as measured by per capita income.

Sources: Besser, T. & Hanson, M. (2003) The Development of Last Resort: The Impact of New State Prisons on Small Town Economies. Paper presented at the 2003 Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, Montreal, Canada King, R., Mauer M. & Huling. T. (2003) Big Prisons, Small Towns: Prison Economics in Rural America. The Sentencing Project, Washington, D.C.



Releasing Low-Risk Elderly Prisoners Would Save Billions of Dollars While Protecting Public Safety, ACLU Report Finds

June 13, 2012

\$16 Billion Spent Annually Locking Up Prisoners 50 Years of Age and Older Who Pose Little Safety Risk

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NEW YORK – States would save on average more than \$66,000 per year by releasing each elderly prisoner they needlessly keep behind bars, a new report released today by the American Civil Liberties Union finds.

Despite evidence showing that elderly people are far less likely to commit crime than the rest of the population, more than \$16 billion of taxpayer money is spent annually locking up hundreds of thousands of relatively low-risk prisoners who are 50 years of age and older, according to the ACLU's report. Age 50 is the criminological consensus of when a prisoner becomes elderly because people age physiologically faster in prison.

"Extremely disproportionate sentencing policies, fueled by the 'tough on crime' and 'war on drugs' movements, have turned our prisons into nursing homes, and taxpayers are footing the bill," said Inimai Chettiar, ACLU advocacy and policy counsel. "Lawmakers need to implement reforms that lead to the release of those elderly prisoners who no longer pose a safety threat sufficient to justify their continued incarceration and reform our sentencing policies to prevent this epidemic at the outset."

The ACLU's report, "At America's Expense: The Mass Incarceration of the Elderly," finds that by 2030, there will be more than 400,000 elderly prisoners behind bars, a 4,400 percent increase from 1981 when only 8,853 state and federal prisoners were elderly. This despite universal agreement among criminologists that the propensity to commit crime plummets with age. In 2009, just over two percent of individuals between the ages of 50 and 54 were arrested, and virtually no one 65 or older was arrested. As a national average, just five to 10 percent of aging prisoners return to prison for any new crime, according to the report.

The states currently imprison 246,600 Americans 50 and older, a generally low-risk population that costs much more to keep locked up than younger prisoners according to the

report. It costs \$34,135 per year to house an average prisoner, but \$68,270 per year to house a prisoner 50 years of age and older.

And according to a fiscal analysis conducted by the ACLU's in-house economist William Bunting as part of the report, states would save on average \$66,294 per year by releasing an elderly prisoner who no longer poses a public safety threat – even when factoring in any government expenditures on released aging prisoners like healthcare or housing costs.

“Simply put, it is an unwise use of taxpayer dollars to spend enormous amounts of money locking up elderly prisoners who no longer need to be behind bars,” said Bunting.

The ACLU's report calls on states to grant elderly prisoners access to a parole hearing, during which parole boards can use risk assessment tools to accurately evaluate whether a prisoner continues to pose a public safety threat or whether he or she can be safely released. Last year the state legislature in Louisiana, which incarcerates more people per capita than any other state, passed such a law, easing taxpayer burden and allowing prisoners to return to their families to care for them while at the same time maintaining public safety.

“The nation's graying prisoner population has become a national epidemic that needs to be addressed immediately,” said Chettiar. “The United States cannot afford to continue to lock people up for no reason.”

To read the report, view a photo gallery of stunning images by Tim Gruber and watch a video featuring Louisiana warden Burl Cain, go to: www.aclu.org/elderlyprisoners Published on American Civil Liberties Union (<http://www.aclu.org>) **Source URL:** <http://www.aclu.org/prisoners-rights/releasing-low-risk-elderly-prisoners-would-save-billions-dollars-while-protecting>



Op-ed: Lawmakers must put a stop to increased prison spending



By [Patriot-News Op-Ed](#)
on February 24, 2013 at 12:00 AM

By Emily Abendroth

Gov. Tom Corbett has once again proposed a budget to keep Pennsylvania on the path of unchecked prison growth and underinvestment in education and social services.

His proposed 2013-2014 budget does little to restore the \$1 billion cut from education and millions more cut from social services during his tenure. Yet under Corbett's plan, the Department of Corrections would receive about \$68 million in increased operating funds and \$166 million for capital projects.

This dramatic increase comes at a time when the Corbett administration is congratulating itself for its corrections "savings." In July, Corbett signed the Criminal Justice Reform Act into law, which he claims will save the state \$139 million. The Department of Corrections also recently announced that it plans to close two state prisons, SCI Cresson in Cambria County and SCI Greensburg in Westmoreland County, and transfer prisoners to a newly built \$200 million facility that now sits empty in Benner Township. Department of Corrections Secretary John Wetzel says the prison closures will save \$23 million a year.

If Gov. Corbett and Secretary Wetzel are right that recent legislative reform and the state's huge investment in new prison construction will save the state millions, we would expect the DOC's budget to reflect those savings. Instead, we see a \$68 million in-

crease, to nearly \$2 billion in annual operating expenses, and a DOC budget projected to hover close to \$2 billion for the next five years.

With the state spending more than \$400 million to build two new prisons on the grounds of SCI Graterford in Montgomery County, we cannot expect the DOC budget to decrease any time soon. While the DOC claims that the new prisons – SCI Phoenix I and II – will replace the old Graterford, they would still add 1,100 beds to the prison system even if the old facility is shuttered.

These numbers beg the question: if Corbett's reforms are shrinking the prison population, why are we still spending millions on prison expansion, using funds desperately needed in our schools and communities?

The Department of Corrections has also refused to commit to permanently closing old Graterford if the new facilities are built. In fact, DOC spokesperson Susan McNaughton said that the facility would remain available for overcrowding. The DOC has done this before, closing SCI Pittsburgh in 2005 after SCI Fayette and SCI Forest were built, only to reopen it two years later. Governor Corbett's budget contains further evidence that the DOC is not serious about closing Graterford. The proposed budget allocates \$1.3 million in capital funds to build a new roof on parts of the existing facility. Why would the DOC spend more than \$1 million to replace the roof on a prison they plan to shut down in two years?

It is time for lawmakers to reverse the trend of unchecked corrections spending and shortsighted expansion plans. They can start by demanding some real answers from the corrections secretary and the governor.

Secretary Wetzel has already come under fire from the Senate and House Judiciary Committees for the way he handled the prison closures in Cambria and Westmoreland Counties. Members of the House Judiciary in particular pressed Wetzel to explain why the state is closing existing prisons only to build expensive new ones, and asked whether construction on SCI Phoenix I and II can still be stopped. Wetzel sidestepped the question, but the reality is that construction is still in the early stages. It is not too late for legislators to demand a thorough investigation into whether the new facilities are necessary. There is little lawmakers can do about SCI Benner Township at this point. With SCI Phoenix I & II, they have the opportunity to save money and do the right thing.

Pennsylvania lawmakers should reject Gov. Corbett's expanded prison budget and instead enact policies that substantially reduce the prison population. There are many ways to do this safely and effectively. In 2005, a bipartisan commission initiated by the legislature recommended parole eligibility for people who had served over 25 years in prison and were over 50 years of age.

The Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing has recommended repealing some of Pennsylvania's harsh mandatory minimum laws. And advocates across the nation have been calling for a treatment-based approach to drug and alcohol addiction instead of incarceration. These initiatives would create a dramatic reduction in prison spending and reunite many incarcerated men and women with their families. The money saved from these reforms could be invested in education, health care, job training—the things we need to create healthier, safer, more sustainable communities.

Pennsylvania faces a tough economic climate after two years of systemic divestment in our public infrastructure. No one wants more prisons and more corrections spending—especially not at the expense of our schools, our health, and our environment. Lawmakers in Harrisburg have the opportunity to stand up to the governor's broken priorities and demand answers and real change from the Corbett administration. The future of our state depends on it.

Emily Abendroth is a member of Decarcerate Pa, a prison reform group

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Close more prisons: Pennsylvania needs sentencing reform and reordered priorities

By Leana Cabral and Sarah Morris

For the past year, a hugely expensive new state prison has sat empty in Centre County. Despite calls to cancel the \$200 million construction when he took office, Gov. Tom Corbett stubbornly moved forward with the unnecessary 2,000-bed prison project, along with construction of two more prisons, each costing another \$200 million, in Montgomery County. As has long been the pattern with prison construction in Pennsylvania, the state decided to build first and ask questions later.

Last week, the Corbett administration finally gave in to mounting public pressure to curb the growth of Pennsylvania's bloated prison system, which has skyrocketed from holding about 8,000 people in 1980 to holding 51,184 people today. On Jan. 9, Department of Corrections Secretary John Wetzel made headlines with his announcement that when the new prison -- SCI Benner -- opens in June, two older prisons in Cambria and Westmoreland counties will be shuttered.

Mr. Wetzel claims the state will save \$23 million per year by closing SCI Greensburg and SCI Cresson and transferring prisoners to the "state-of-the-art" Benner facility and a new unit at SCI Pine Grove. The \$23 million annual savings, however, is more than offset by the \$400 million the Corbett administration is spending to build two new prisons in Montgomery County.

It is time that the governor listened to the increasing calls from communities across the state for the immediate cancellation of these prison projects. We will not bring Pennsylvania's mass incarceration problem under control by simply replacing old prisons with new ones. We need to decrease our prison population and ensure that it will continue to shrink, and the only way to do that is to enact substantive sentencing reform that allows us to close prisons and invest the money we save on prison cells in our schools, health care and social services.

We can do this by creating parole eligibility for the thousands of elderly men and women serving life sentences in our state prisons, re-examining our mandatory minimum sentencing laws -- which have been shown to have no impact on whether a person returns to prison -- and finally recognizing that incarceration is not an effective way to address drug addiction and abuse.

We should also note that Mr. Wetzel has yet to make a firm commitment that the closure of SCI Greensburg and SCI Cresson will be permanent. In 2005, the state "mothballed" SCI Pittsburgh in order to justify the opening of two new prisons, SCI Forest and SCI Fayette. Barely two years later, Pittsburgh was re-opened and filled to capacity.

Clearly, the projected \$23 million in savings from closing Cresson and Greensburg will go out the window if the state continues to reopen old prisons. If Mr. Corbett and Mr. Wetzel are serious about reducing Pennsylvania's prison population, they will tear these two prisons down for good.

Understandably, residents in Cresson and Greensburg are deeply concerned about how prison closures will impact their local economies. Indeed, their communities have been suffering from Mr. Corbett's budgeting decisions for the past two years.

Like counties all over the state, Cambria and Westmoreland counties -- home to SCI Cresson and SCI Greensburg -- have seen devastating budget cuts under the Corbett administration. School districts in Cambria County have lost more than \$9 million in state funding since 2010, while schools in Westmoreland County have seen funding slashed by more than \$20 million. SCI Greensburg sits in the middle of the Greensburg School District, which has seen its state funding decrease by 13 percent -- almost \$1.5 million over the last two years. In Cambria County, human service programs have seen 10 percent cuts across the board.

The state has forced rural communities to turn to prisons as a rare source of stable jobs for far too long. Instead of searching for ways to keep prisons open, we should be demanding that the state invest resources in rural economies in ways that promote health, sustainability and growth. Imagine if the \$200 million spent on SCI Benner's construction had instead been invested in saving education and social service jobs in these counties, and in creating sustainable infrastructure and agriculture instead of prison beds.

No one wins when rural communities are forced to fight each other over jobs in an industry that thrives on sorrow. Prisons are not the answer to Pennsylvania's economic woes -- in fact, they are a big part of the problem.

Mr. Corbett's broken priorities are holding our state back. All communities in Pennsylvania deserve quality schools, access to reliable health care and the security of well-paying jobs. As long as we keep funneling millions of taxpayer dollars into constructing new prisons, we will continue to underfund the many things that actually create safe, stable communities.

Prison expansion is a relic of the past. There is no such thing as a "state-of-the-art" prison. Closing Cresson and Greensburg is a small step in the right direction, but if Mr. Corbett and Mr. Wetzel really want a sustainable future for Pennsylvania, they need to get our corrections budget and our prison population under control. By cancelling the

Montgomery County prison construction and pursuing meaningful sentencing reform, they can demonstrate a genuine commitment to public safety and economic security in our communities. That kind of leadership would be "state-of-the-art."

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Who Is Decarcerate PA?

Decarcerate PA is a grassroots campaign dedicated to shifting state funding away from incarceration and prison expansion and towards schools and social programs. We believe that investment in jobs, public services, and education is a more effective use of public resources and creates safer, more stable communities.

In the last year, Decarcerate PA has:

1. Launched a [three point platform](#) demanding “no new prisons, a reduction in the prison population, and a reinvestment in our communities,” which has been endorsed by 85 organizations across the state, including the Pennsylvania ACLU, the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools, The Goldring Reentry Initiative, The Human Rights Coalition, Jobs with Justice, Liberty Resources, the NAACP Criminal Justice Project, The National Lawyers Guild-Philadelphia, Project HOME, and the Returning Citizens Voters Movement.
2. Engaged in letter writing, call in days, and legislative visits to try and influence policy makers to end prison expansion and enact proactive legislation that leads to a reduction in the prison population. These include:
 - a. Attended the March 4th Appropriations Committee Budget Hearings on the Department of Corrections (both House and Senate) and sent letters to all Appropriations Committee members encouraging them to question the Department’s funding priorities and the need for new prison construction.
 - b. Attended the January 22nd Senate Judiciary Hearings on the prison closures in Westmoreland and Cambria County and met with legislators to discuss the issue of prison expansion funding.
 - c. Attended the February 13th House Judiciary Hearings on the prison closures in Westmoreland and Cambria County and sent letters to all House Judiciary mem-

- bers encouraging them to question prison expansion funding.
 - d. Held a December 19th 2012 call-in day to ask Governor Corbett to cancel the prison construction.
 - e. Held an October 4th 2012 call-in day urging legislators to vote no on Senate Bill 850.
 - f. Held a May 15th 2012 “tweet-in day” asking legislators and the Governor to reallocate money from the prison system to the school system.
- 3. Published editorials on the need for prison reform in all four of the state’s largest papers:
 - a. Patriot News Op-ed February 24th, 2013: Lawmakers must put a stop to increased prison spending (available here: http://www.pennlive.com/opinion/index.ssf/2013/02/op-ed_lawmakers_must_a_stop_to_increased_prison_spending.html#incart_river.)
 - b. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Op-Ed, January 16th 2013: Close more prisons: Pennsylvania needs sentencing reform and reordered priorities (available here: <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/opinion/perspectives/close-more-prisons-pennsylvania-needs-sentencing-reform-and-reordered-priorities-670532/>).
 - c. Philadelphia Inquirer Op-Ed October 9th 2012 : Pa.'s prison juggernaut (available here: http://articles.philly.com/2012-10-09/news/34343785_1_prison-population-prison-problem-prison-system).
 - d. Daily News Op-Ed July 9th, 2012: True Prison Reform Continues to Elude Pennsylvania (available here: http://articles.philly.com/2012-07-09/news/32602281_1_prison-reform-elderly-prisoners-older-prisoners).
- 4. Won the “Big Vision” Award for activism from the Philadelphia City Paper (article available at: http://www.citypaper.net/cover_story/2012-12-13-big-vision-awards-activism-watchdog-decarcerate-pa.html)).
- 5. Held several rallies where people could speak out about these issues and the negative impact mass incarceration has on families and communities, including:
 - a. January 31st 2013 rally at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.
 - b. November 19th 2012 rally at City Hall in Philadelphia.

- c. September 19th 2012 rally outside Governor Corbett's "town hall" meeting at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
 - d. July 17th 2012 rally near SCI Graterford in Montgomery County
 - e. May 15th rally at Governor Corbett's address to the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce.
 - f. February 20th 2012 rallies in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia at companies profiting from the expansion of Pennsylvania's prison system.
- 6. Debated Department of Corrections Secretary John Wetzel on WHYY, Philadelphia's local NPR affiliate (available here: <http://whyy.org/cms/radiotimes/2012/08/01/debating-pennsylvanias-prison-system/>).
 - 7. Hosted a community barbeque and other positive, community building events.
 - 8. Used social media to get our message across about the need for different funding priorities in our state.
 - 9. Worked closely with other groups, especially teachers and students, to advocate for adequate educational opportunities for young people in Pennsylvania, including the Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, the Coalition for Nonviolent Schools, the Youth Art and Self Empowerment Project, and the Teacher Action Group.
 - 10. Spoken at dozens of events at conferences, churches, schools, and community centers about the need for prison reform, including Elizabethtown College, Enon Baptist Church, the Mainline Unitarian Universalist Church, Ursinus College, the Beyond the Walls Prison Health and Reentry Summit, the Prisoner Advocacy Summit, the University of Pennsylvania, the Herschel King Festival, and Temple's Mass Incarceration in America: Advocacy, Art, and the Academy Conference.