

[Help For Drug Addicts Just Got A Lot Less Likely](#)

In A State Where A Large Number Of Crimes Are Drug-related, Prisons Soon Will Cut Treatment For Inmates.

October 9, 2003 | By Stephanie Erickson, Sentinel Staff Writer

A lack of drug-treatment programs is forcing judges to incarcerate an increasing number of inmates while at the same time in-prison treatment is being slashed.

In a state where almost a third of those entering Florida prisons last year had been convicted of drug offenses, the Department of Corrections has significantly reduced state programs to help those who are released and cut in-prison treatment at all but 13 of Florida's 55 prisons.

Corrections officials blame the state Legislature for the cuts, which take effect Nov. 1 and are expected to save taxpayers \$13 million, reducing by more than a third the number of beds at 20 residential treatment programs throughout the state.

The cuts affect all four Central Florida prisons, in Brevard, Lake, Polk and Volusia counties, as well as four residential drug-treatment centers -- Bridges of America in Orange, Seminole and Polk counties and the Salvation Army in Daytona Beach.

"This is critical for us," said Frank Constantine, director at Bridges, which is losing \$1.5 million overall for its five programs statewide. "The cuts were very deep."

Drug courts offer judges the option of sentencing some addicts -- generally nonviolent offenders -- to treatment programs rather than prison. Bridges, which runs court-ordered drug- and alcohol-rehabilitation programs, had been at full capacity and now is losing 45 beds in Central Florida.

Officials there say the fact that judges must now send more addicted felons to prison will add to overcrowding. As of June 30, there were 77,316 inmates in the state -- a 5.1 percent increase over the previous year, according to Corrections statistics.

Thousands of those inmates are in drug treatment, according to the Department of Corrections. Consider that:

More inmates are admitted for drug offenses than any other charge.

Roughly 17,000 of Florida's 72,000 inmates were in drug treatment during the last fiscal year.

Another 32,640 offenders received treatment in residential or outpatient community programs outside prison.

In addition to inpatient centers like Bridges, 15 of Central Florida's outpatient programs lost money.

"It's almost completely wiped out outpatient treatment," said Lori Constantine-Brown, a vice president at Bridges. "These guys are going to go in and get no treatment, and come out and go right back to it."

Orlando native Steven Polen said he doubts he would have turned his life around if a judge hadn't sentenced him to six months at Bridges in Orlando.

"I probably would have used again and gotten into more trouble," said Polen, whose drugs of choice since age 13 had been alcohol, mushrooms and marijuana. "I didn't have any feelings then, no care in the world."

Polen, 22, was arrested several times on drug-related charges ranging from burglary to assault and battery, culminating with an 11-month stay in the Orange County Jail.

After 11 weeks at Bridges, Polen said he's getting along with his parents, hopes to begin spending time with his 11-month-old daughter, and wants to be a drug- and alcohol-abuse counselor.

On Tuesday, he waited for a bus to take him to Quizno's for a job interview. "I feel so much better," he said. "I don't want to go back to that lifestyle."

There should be more drug-treatment programs, not fewer, he said.

"People who used to smoke crack leave here with their heads high," he said.

Bridges had been serving more than 500 people a year at its three Central Florida locations.

"I've seen a lot of people change their lives," said Charles Brown, who came to the Orlando Bridges in 1983 after 14 years as a heroin addict and now is a vice president there.

Brown, 54, said there often is a perception that those in drug treatment "sit around all day and hang out in a swimming pool."

"It's not like that," he said. "We make demands of them. Some people would prefer to go to prison than somewhere like this."

Clients who leave the campus off Mercy Drive during their first two months are kicked out. Lights out is at 10:30 p.m. and classes, from addiction education to job-placement training, go from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Addicts need "a whole menu of treatment" addressing behavioral and psychological issues to ensure they don't return to drug use, Constantine-Brown said.

Bridges officials say they will keep pressing the Legislature for additional resources. Corrections Secretary James Crosby already has asked the Legislature for more money.

"The problem is that right now no one has money," Constantine-Brown said. "Everybody is competing for the same dollars that aren't even there."

Belvin Perry, chief judge of the 9th Judicial Circuit, said drug treatment costs less than incarceration.

"One of the linchpins to success with drug offenders is treatment," he said. "If you send someone to prison and you don't offer them any treatment, when they get out the potential for them reoffending is very high."