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Budget cuts worry backers of inmate transition programs

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Backers of programs that help inmates transition back to society say that a state plan to close 10 Florida inmate re-entry programs in a cost-cutting move will jeopardize public safety and eliminate 70 local jobs.

At a rally in Bradenton on Friday, employees, supporters and clients of the Bradenton Bridge inmate re-entry program, which houses 120 non-violent female inmates, slammed the Florida Department of Corrections' move to close the program.

The DOC recently announced that the Bradenton program is one of 10 facilities it is closing.

Bradenton Bridge and a similar men's facility in Broward County are both run by the faith-based Bridges of America, and are slated to close by the end of the month.

Inmates, who can work outside jobs, earn GEDs and participate in treatment programs at the two facilities, will be shipped back to traditional barbed-wire prisons. It is a far cry from their current wireless world, where they can take a bus or bicycle to work.

At a press conference Friday, held on the grounds of the Bradenton facility, a cross-section of the community pointed out flaws in the DOC plan.

Bridges of America President Lori Costantino-Brown said her programs house inmates cheaper than the DOC — \$34 per day as opposed to \$56 per day in a state facility. She said her programs also get better results, namely an 11 percent recidivism rate as opposed to the 40 percent of state inmates who return to prison within three years of their release.

The cost of housing alone is \$1 million less in the Bridges programs, Costantino-Brown said.

"This is a big step backward to close the Bradenton Bridge, no matter what the state budget constraints," Costantino-Brown said. "These cuts jeopardize public safety by turning inmates loose with no chance to succeed."

DOC spokesperson Ann Howard said the two Bridges facilities are not the only facilities slated for closure; 10 facilities in all will be shuttered, including five prisons, she said.

"The decision was across the board, all over the state," Howard said. "We're making tough decisions, but a good portion of our budget goes to running facilities."



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Closing the Bradenton facility, Howard said, will save taxpayers \$1.9 million, including \$480,000 this fiscal year.

Costantino-Brown and her staff said Bridges offers more than just secure housing.

Michelle Kline runs a hair salon in Bradenton. She is one of 19 employers who have hired a Bridges inmate as part of its work-release program. A portion of their wages pays for their housing and care, and the remainder will be available when the inmate is released.

Kline's worker was trained as a hair stylist before she was arrested. "She's incredible — productive, punctual, happy — and she does the work of two people," Kline said.

"This is terrible, a disgrace. A lot of these girls are working already," said Shelly DiConstanzo, whose daughter Cassie is an inmate at the facility.

Cassie DiConstanzo was sent to prison for selling pills to an undercover officer. Now, she is head of maintenance for the Bradenton facility. She and another inmate routinely stay up past midnight waxing floors.

"I made bad choices," Cassie said. "This place is what I needed at the end of my sentence."

Manatee County Commissioner Robin DiSabatino learned Tuesday in an email that the facility was set to close. Several hours later she was inundated with messages and phone calls.

She urged the public to call their legislators in Tallahassee and tell them to keep the Bridges facility open.

"I was flabbergasted and devastated when I heard," DiSabatino said. "Closing the Bradenton Bridge is wrong. Please save this facility."

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