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Allison DeFoor: Let's look at the prison cuts in a different way

Allison DeFoor
My View

One often-quoted definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over but hoping for a different result. As a longtime student of Florida's justice system, to me the Florida Department of Corrections' approach to making budget cuts seems a bit insane.

There is no doubt the state of Florida faces serious fiscal challenges, and state agencies are doing what every family in Florida is doing. Both need to prioritize.

The real challenge lies in setting those priorities, and repeating the same old patterns won't change anything for the better. This is a lesson that DOC needs to learn. But the department's plans to eliminate several thoughtful programs that achieve results, in some cases for less money, suggest that parts of DOC may still be stuck in a mindset typified by old movies like "Cool Hand Luke" and "The Longest Yard," despite the best efforts of a new governor and secretary to turn the agency in a new direction. All of this while keeping open 9,000 empty prison beds and preparing to open 4,000 more.

A failure to communicate, indeed.

For example, DOC has announced plans to shut down two programs operated by Bridges of America, in the Fort Lauderdale area and Bradenton. These two successful inmate re-entry programs aim at guiding inmates into a law-abiding life after their release from prison.

These programs offer the most important thing for any benefits-vs.-cost analysis: measurable results. They are required to measure their post-release performance, and the performance numbers suggest that the Bridges approach works. Two out of three inmates leaving DOC prisons are rearrested within three years, but 90 percent of Bridges graduates stay out of trouble during that same period.

Success is also happening elsewhere in Florida. Hillsborough Correctional Institution, a state-run faith- and character-based women's prison, enjoys volunteer support that translates into a very low 7-percent recidivism rate — a fancy

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term for re-imprisonment that really means more and more victims. The 300 or so women housed there benefit from mentoring by more than 400 community volunteers who help them re-enter society properly. In study after study, this kind of mentoring has proven to be a huge factor in preventing more crime, more victims and returns to prison.

Best of all, such programs often produce these results for far less cost than regular prison.

DOC proposes to keep open a facility similar to Bridges, the Sago Palm Re-entry Center in Pahokee. That facility does the same sort of work in-house — but it does it more expensively, with worse results than the faith-based nonprofit.

Hillsborough CI, which DOC also plans to close, appears to have higher costs, but only when the very real costs of later returns to prison are ignored ("externalized" in economic terms). Think of the choice this way: a low-cost hospital that makes people sicker and leads them to come back for more treatment, or a higher-cost hospital that actually makes people well? Programs like Bridges offer a third, even better option: They operate at a lower cost and are more effective than the similar programs DOC proposes to keep open.

Go figure.

So we must ask ourselves why the DOC recommends eliminating these programs

when the measurable results are so positive. Unintentionally or otherwise, the department's recommendations protect the core of DOC's traditional mission, which relies on bricks-and-mortar prisons aimed solely at immobilization. Faith-based, successful alternatives are the proposed casualties.

The Bridges and Hillsborough approaches rely on programs and mentoring rather than structures. Nonprofit sector staff and hundreds of volunteers can have a huge impact. Above all, measureable results toward a carefully selected target should be the yardstick. Recidivism is a good beginning point.

DOC may be measuring the wrong things. When evaluating which prisons to close, DOC did not factor in recidivism — actual success measured in fewer new victims and returns to prison. Instead of counting how much it could cut by eliminating innovative programs, DOC should be measuring whether those programs can do the job more affordably and more effectively than

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standard prison approaches.

It's time to stop wishing for better results from the same old approach. This time, let's get better results by doing what works. Fortunately, the Legislature is starting to ask these very questions. It is time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison DeFoor is an attorney who also has been sheriff of Monroe County and a judge. He is active in Smart Justice initiatives and volunteers at Wakulla Correctional Institution.

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