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Officials, inmates protest shutdown of Bradenton female inmates' work release center

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Officials speak during a press conference Friday regarding the closure of the Bradenton Bridge, a women's transition and work release facility. LAURA MOREL/Bradenton Herald

MANATEE -- With tears in her eyes, Shelli DiCostanzo thanked Bradenton Bridge, a women's transition and work release center, for saving her daughter.

In 2009, Cassandra DiCostanzo was sentenced to five years in prison and five years community supervision on heroin charges, according to state records.

But in September, the 22-year-old was transferred to the Bradenton Bridge. There, she takes classes, has maintenance responsibilities and hopes to go to school after finishing her sentence.

But the center may soon close its doors, sending the 120 inmates it houses back to state prison.

Bradenton Bridge was notified that the Florida Department of Corrections will shut it down March 31 due to budget cuts.

"It would be a crisis for Cassy," DiCostanzo said during a press conference held Friday at the center. "I'm so proud of the work that she and the other women do and the camaraderie in which they do it."

Local officials and current and former Bradenton Bridge inmates gathered at the conference to highlight the importance of the facility, which offers inmates counseling, classes and employment opportunities.

Lori Brown, president of Bridges of America, operator of Bradenton Bridge, told the crowd that inmates who leave state prison without re-entry services are handed \$50, a bus ticket and the clothes on their backs, leading them to become "homeless and with no chance to succeed."

"The state is throwing back into prison 120 nonviolent females who have worked hard to turn their lives around, who have played by the rules and who are succeeding," she said. "It just doesn't make sense."

After the conference, Brown said legislators have told her the issue is still "up in the air," but that the Department of Corrections can arrive any day to take the inmates to state prisons.

The recidivism rate for Bridges programs -- there is a men's facility in Broward County also slated to close -- is 1 in 10 inmates after three years, compared to 4 in 10 in three years for inmates who leave state prison without re-entry services, according to a media release.

"That's why it's a big step backwards to close the Bradenton Bridge, no matter the budget constraints," she said.

More than 30 people employed at Bradenton Bridge, in the 2100 block of 63rd Avenue East, will lose their jobs.

Elizabeth Darby, who works at the center, said there are 112 volunteers and that inmates also give back to the community by volunteering at Habitat for Humanity or Keep Manatee Beautiful.

Manatee County Commissioner Robin DiSabatino said she "can't understand why Tallahassee is going to close this facility down."

"There's no reason that I can comprehend," she said, later urging the crowd to call their legislators in Tallahassee to "stop this nonsense."

Local business owners, employers of some of the 36 inmates on work release, were also at the conference.

Michelle Kline, of Fantastic Sam's hair salon, said one inmate is currently employed at her business.

"She is probably one of the best employees I've hired in seven years," Kline said. "We would lose a great employee."

Steve Walters, of American Photonics, has employed three inmates at his infrared optics business in Sarasota.

"I can say with confidence that rehabilitation actually does work," Walters said. "These girls are well-suited to enter the workforce. It really would be a shame if they shut it down."

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