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Plan to close prison re-entry centers angers lawmakers

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Published Friday, March 2, 2012

TALLAHASSEE — Angry legislators are trying to block a cost-saving move by Florida's prison system to close two centers that help inmates learn skills that help them rejoin society.

Without consulting lawmakers in the final days of the current session, the Department of Corrections is closing faith-based re-entry centers in Bradenton and Pompano Beach, at an estimated savings of \$1 million. The agency needs to cut \$79 million in total to balance its books, it says.

But lawmakers support re-entry programs, which they say reduce the chance that an inmate will return to prison. Some lawmakers also resent not knowing of the closure plan until they learned of it through news accounts.

Sen. Elyn Bogdanoff, R-Fort Lauderdale, who was negotiating final details of the prison budget Friday, said her office has been flooded with phone calls of protest about the decision.

"I would ask you at this point to work more closely with the Legislature in understanding the impact to our communities before you do what you do," Bogdanoff told two top prison officials.

Other lawmakers were troubled to hear that the estimated 300 inmates who hold jobs and learn life skills in the re-entry centers would lose those jobs and be shifted back into the general inmate population.

"I cannot stand here and tell you that those individuals that would go back into the institutions would be put into the same types of programs and training that they have in the re-entry centers," Deputy Corrections Secretary Mike Crews told lawmakers.

Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, blasted the state for axing the centers. "Why would we want to get rid of programs that work?" he said. "It's absolutely crazy."

Rep. Rich Glorioso, R-Plant City, excoriated prison officials in public. At a televised hearing, he said the decision was "a-- backwards," and quickly added: "I'm sorry I said that word."

Lawmakers demanded a detailed cost analysis showing how closing the centers saves money.

The two doomed re-entry centers have been operated since 2005 by Bridges of America, a not-for-profit company. Bridges CEO Lori Costantino-Brown said her company has spent more than \$4 million on furniture, computers and other improvements at the centers, which are owned by the state. "It appears that we were singled out," Costantino-Brown said.

The controversy over closing re-entry centers follows a decision by the agency to scale back visits by probation officers to most probationers, at an estimated savings of more than \$400,000.

The flap over closing re-entry centers mirrors one involving the state's efforts to close prisons because of a surplus of empty prison beds. Responding to community protests, lawmakers have tentatively agreed to keep open two of the prisons slated for shutdown, in Hillsborough and Jefferson counties.

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