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## Robin DiSabatino: Bradenton inmate release center too valuable to eliminate

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As an elected official during extremely tough economic times, I fully understand the difficulty of dealing with declining revenues and, therefore, having to make difficult choices in cutting budgets.

In recent years it seems this is an endless exercise. We have to weigh all of the facts, statistics and evidence available to make sure that we retain the most worthy expenditures and programs, and reduce or cut those that don't quite measure up.

Unfortunately, one of these decisions has been made on the state level that I believe should be revisited. The Florida Department of Corrections has decided to eliminate the Bradenton Bridge Work Release Center along with a similar facility in Pompano Beach. The centers are operated by Bridges of America, an organization with a long history of successfully transitioning inmates back into society.

These programs have a remarkable history of actively rehabilitating inmates, preventing most from committing crimes after release and returning to prison, and therefore having to again be supported by taxpayers. They do it far more effectively than happens when housing inmates in traditional taxpayer-funded prisons without the services Bridges provides.

The Bradenton Bridge houses 120 female inmates. The inmates first are put into an intensive nine-month re-entry education program. It consists of numerous options, including a GED course, Toastmasters public speaking, vocational counseling and training, and substance abuse education.

Subsequently they go through another nine-month program where the inmate actually takes a job in the community, spends short periods in the home environment and continues classes. Some of the pay from their job goes toward restitution and some into savings to pay for housing or transportation after release.

And the results from the program are truly outstanding: After seven years former convicts have only an 11 percent recidivism rate versus 33 percent of those released from state prison. Even more impressive, these facilities provide programs to more than 300 inmates at a cost that is over \$500,000 less than it would cost the Department of Corrections to house them in a standard prison with union prison guards.

Let me reiterate, the program delivers far better recidivism rates which is the most important statistic in corrections at a much lower cost than housing a prisoner in a traditional prison bed.

Additionally, the Bridges are run by private-sector workers rather than the much more expensive union prison workers, and inmates work in private-sector jobs in the community. If these programs are cancelled, the inmates will lose these jobs, and we will also lose the private-sector jobs at the facilities.

The Bradenton Bridges facility was in horrible shape when the program began in 2005, and DOC did not have the funds to make necessary repairs and add needed modular units. Bridges stepped up and made the improvements and have maintained the property.

The program is a win for Bradenton, for the state, for the taxpayers and for the inmates. I strongly urge officials at DOC to revisit this decision and seek cuts elsewhere.

Robin DiSabatino, is a Manatee County Commissioner.

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