

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT



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RESTORE NEEDED PRISON FUNDING



The Florida Department of Corrections has decided to close the Broward Bridge Transition Center in Pompano Beach, along with a similar program in Bradenton. It will help cut \$79 million, including the \$3 million the state pays for a program to address recidivism. As a result, that program, Bridges of America, which provides a number of services to help more than 300 inmates make a successful transition from prison back to society, would cease operations next month.

Seven years ago, DOC officials courted the Bridges of America program to help the state reduce its spiraling operating costs. Recidivism — the seemingly unbreakable circle in which released prisoners end up back behind bars — was and remains a costly expense for Florida. Buoyed by the success of the Bridges' programming in other states, DOC officials in 2005 offered the agency a five-year contract to bring the program to the Sunshine State.

The transition program exceeded DOC's expectations. Its recidivism rate is 11 percent, far less than the department's 33 percent, and its drug treatment and vocational training programs have turned a select group of inmates into productive citizens. Currently, 112 inmates are in the Bridges' work-release program, each inmate earning \$32,000 a year in a variety of jobs. DOC officials extended the contract for another five years in 2010, and the state to have found a viable means of both curbing costs and helping inmates adjust back to life in society. Now the department is making plans to

return the inmates participating in the Bridges' program back to prison, a move that will boost incarceration costs and rob society of the benefits of true rehabilitation.

Ending the Bridges of America programs would clearly be counterproductive to the oft-stated goal of reducing prison costs.

This short-sightedness is all the more disappointing since it comes on the heels of a smart legislative call. Leaders in the Florida Senate tried to push through a massive prison privatization plan that would have turned over 28 state-owned prison facilities in South Florida to a private firm. Credit the chamber with coming to its senses by rejecting that measure.

Too bad lawmakers haven't been equally wise in helping corrections officials find an alternative to their shortfall in the department's institutional budget. The Bridges of America program, and its \$3 million annual cost, seems a victim of desperate department budget paring.

DOC has other entry programs, which have seen their funding cut to help cover the state shortfall, but none of them has quite matched the potential of Bridges.

It's not too late for the Florida Legislature to find the money to keep the program going until full funding can be restored. It's the best option if Florida is serious about cutting costly recidivism rates and more importantly help non-violent offenders find a better life outside of prison.

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