

Office of Performance Evaluations

News Release: Operational Efficiencies in Idaho's Prison System

January 16, 2010

(BOISE) Today the legislature's independent, non-partisan evaluation office released its report to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on the state of Idaho's prison system. The report commends the Department of Correction for its efforts to keep the system running while absorbing a 9 percent budget decrease between fiscal years 2009 and 2010 and a budget holdback of approximately \$2.4 million in fiscal year 2010. Department officials managed these fiscal and other infrastructure challenges by closing two of its most expensive to operate housing units, bringing back inmates from expensive out-of-state placements, furloughing staff, and holding some vacant positions open.

The report found that Idaho's prison system faces a variety of challenges including aging and outdated facility infrastructure, limited staffing levels, compliance with national standards, and growing operating budget shortfalls. In addition, the current population forecast indicates additional capacity will be needed as the prison population is expected to grow from 7,283 in fiscal year 2009 to 8,608 in fiscal year 2013—an increase of 18 percent. With Idaho prisons operating at or near full capacity, these forecasted population increases will require policymakers to make tough decisions to improve efficiency and meet future system demands. To assist policymakers in moving forward, the report provides short- and long-term recommendations to improve the efficiency of prison facilities and security staffing.

The report suggests a strategic approach to both modernize Idaho's prison facilities and improve security staffing. The report recommends that the Department of Correction and the Legislature begin planning to replace the state's least efficient facilities, which have outdated designs that do not meet national standards, are difficult to staff adequately, and are expensive to operate. Modernizing the state's prison infrastructure can save substantial public money by allowing efficient allocation of security staff and reducing future facility maintenance and rehabilitation costs, including the current \$35 million backlog in deferred projects. Replacing the state's most inefficient facilities would net the state a cost savings of approximately \$24.9 million if the money was in hand today, which translates into annual savings of about \$1.7 million for a period of 50 years.

Replacing inefficient prison facilities would also help the state meet future demands for additional capacity while improving compliance with national correctional standards. In his response to the report's finding, Governor Butch Otter concurred that modernized facilities can yield future efficiencies and said, "When economic conditions improve and offer more certainty, I will work with legislative leaders to address the facility needs of Idaho's prison system in a responsible manner."

Executive Director Wayne Meuleman of the Idaho State Building Authority hopes that the analysis will serve as a model for evaluating facilities at other state agencies. He writes, "The analysis of the existing facilities is a complex job, well done, and is the first comprehensive analysis of state government facilities of this type that I have seen."

In his response to the study, Director Brent Reinke of the department states that the report's facts and analysis will guide the development of more efficient prisons. He has also proposed a three-way, joint

collaborative effort with the evaluation office and the Washington State Institute for Public Policy for conducting an outcome study of alternatives to incarceration. Rakesh Mohan, director of the legislative evaluation office, said that "such a study would not only be beneficial to the department but also would offer valuable information to policymakers on the effectiveness of these programs."

The eight-member Joint Legislative Oversight Committee is equally divided between the two political parties and the two chambers of the Legislature. At the end of the 2009 legislative session, the committee unanimously voted to direct the non-partisan Office of Performance Evaluations to conduct this study by examining operations and capacity in Idaho's prison system. Senator Elliot Werk and Representative Clifford Bayer co-chair the committee.

The entire report is posted on the Office of Performance Evaluations' website at www.idaho.gov/ope.