LOUISIANA’S HIGH INCARCERATION RATE DRIVES COSTS, PRIVATIZING PRISONS DOESN’T SOLVE PROBLEM

By: Steve Spires

The Louisiana House of Representatives deserves some praise for voting last week to scrap the proposed sale of Avoyelles Correctional Center. The sale was a risky financial bet that was unlikely to produce the savings that its supporters were touting, and instead could have saddled the state with additional costs in future years. But House Bill 850, which would allow the 1,564-bed prison to be privatized if certain conditions are met, remains a troublesome proposal that would compromise the jobs of nearly 300 workers while also threatening public safety.

While privatization may reduce the state’s costs in the short-term, it is the wrong way to save money in a state that leads the world in incarceration. A better way to lower the state’s prison costs is through policies that result in fewer people being locked up for non-violent offenses in the first place, and investments in programs that reduce the risk of offenders committing another crime and being sent back to prison.

Soaring Prison Population Drives Costs
Louisiana locks up more of its citizens, per capita, than any other state, or any country in the world. Nearly 40,000 people in the state are behind bars, more than half of them in local jails, and another 70,000 are either on probation or parole.

Louisiana also spends less money, per prisoner, than any other state, and devotes a smaller share of its corrections spending to rehabilitation than most states.

Last year, the state spent $665 million to house prisoners: $495 million in its own facilities and another $170 million for local sheriffs to house state inmates. That’s about 7 percent of the state general fund.

To help reduce prison costs, Gov. Bobby Jindal initially proposed selling Avoyelles to a private corporation for its assessed value of $35 million, with the proceeds going to the state’s Budget Stabilization Fund. The buyer would then have signed a 20-year contract to operate the prison.

When it became clear that this plan did not have enough votes to pass the House, it was reworked by its sponsor (Rep. Henry Burns of Haughton) in a way that would prohibit the sale of Avoyelles, but allows its operations to be contracted out to a private operator for a period of up to 10 years.
Privatization is Bad for Workers, Safety

Louisiana already spends the least per inmate of any state in the country, and privatizing Avoyelles would lower those costs even more. Because most of the cost of running a prison is labor-related, the only way a private contractor can cut costs and increase profits is to significantly reduce employee salaries and benefits.

The privatization of Avoyelles would force the layoff of nearly 300 employees who now staff the prison. While many of these workers would likely be hired back by the private contractor, they are likely to face pay and benefit cuts of as much as 30 percent or more.

Prison employees have tough, demanding jobs. Drastically cutting their pay and benefits would make it harder to attract and retain good employees. Private prisons, in general, have higher rates of staff turnover and less experienced staff than publicly-operated prisons.

Privatization also results in lower-quality prison operations, evidence shows. This includes higher rates of drug use by inmates at private prisons, as well as more escapes.

The privately-run prisons in Winn and Allen parishes have more than twice as much prisoner sexual misconduct as Avoyelles. Over the last four years, both private prisons have also reported far more assaults that resulted in serious injury to inmates or staff – six at Allen, 14 at Winn and only one such incident at Avoyelles.

And while escapes are rare events, they are very significant. In 2009, Allen had three escapes and Winn had one. Avoyelles hasn’t had an escape in nearly a decade.

Corrections Secretary James LeBlanc has described Avoyelles, Allen and Winn as “identical facilities” that provide a “perfectly good laboratory for comparing private prisons” to public ones. By this measure, it appears the publicly-run Avoyelles is a safer facility than Allen or Winn. Savings shouldn’t come at the expense of prison security or the safety of staff, inmates and the surrounding community.

Louisiana Has Other Options

Instead of trying to cut costs through privatization, Louisiana should focus on reforming its sentencing laws while placing a greater emphasis on prisoner education, job training and finding alternatives to prison for low-level, non-violent offenders.

All of these reforms would cost significantly less than incarceration, freeing up money that can be invested in schools, health care, transportation and other services that improve the economy. Many reforms have been successfully tested in other states—including traditional “tough on crime” states like Texas—without increasing crime.
Louisiana’s Department of Corrections has already taken important steps in this direction in recent years by establishing re-entry centers for former prisoners in Shreveport and New Orleans. Policymakers have also implemented changes to good-time credits and lowered barriers to parole, allowing some qualified offenders to be released earlier.

The Legislature should continue down this road, instead of trying to generate quick cash through privatization, which comes with hidden costs to workers and public safety.

The Baton Rouge-based Louisiana Budget Project provides independent research and analysis of Louisiana fiscal issues and their impact on low- and moderate-income residents. For more information, visit [www.labudget.org](http://www.labudget.org).