

## IDOC director: Time to rethink how the state deals with drug offenders

MOLLY PARKER THE SOUTHERN

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CARTERVILLE – Illinois Department of Corrections Acting Director John Baldwin said on Thursday that an overhaul of the corrections' system is in order.

He noted the spike over the past four decades in the state's prison population is largely because of an increase in the number of people locked up for substance abuse-related problems, and said new laws and policies should be enacted to reverse the trend.

“We need your help. We want you to be part of our team,” said Baldwin, who was a keynote speaker at the 13th annual Southern Illinois Drug Awareness Conference held this week at John A. Logan College. Attendees, roughly 500 of them, represented a variety of fields that interact with drug offenders, including law and order, counselors, educators and many others.

He told the group that in 1970, there were 66 people behind state prison bars for every 100,000 Illinois citizens, and today, there's roughly 380 people incarcerated per every 100,000.

Baldwin, the former Iowa prisons' chief who was appointed by Gov. Bruce Rauner in August to lead IDOC, said the state has to rethink the way it deals with drug offenders, both those behind bars and in the community. The State Commission on Criminal Justice and Sentencing Reform is beginning that work, he said. Rauner has directed commission members to craft a plan to reduce the prison population by 25 percent in a decade.

The commission released 14 recommendations in January, and Baldwin said progress has already been made on some of them. For example, he said IDOC is working with the Secretary of State's Office to overcome previous challenges to ensuring all offenders have a state ID upon their return to the community, given how important an ID is to restarting life on the outside.

Baldwin also said that the administration is going to review which government-funded programs intended to assist offenders are effective. An SIU professor has been commissioned to conduct a data-driven, top-to-bottom review, he said. To the providers in the audience, Baldwin said, "Make sure your program works."

As part of that reform, he also said IDOC is in the early stages of implementing an inmate risk assessment, with the intended goal of providing more services to medium- and high-risk offenders, and fewer services to offenders who are at a low-risk of returning to the judicial system.

Baldwin said the system is currently upside down, with more money being spent on returning inmates who are considered at a low-risk of re-offending, when research shows that these individuals do best when they are allowed to resume their lives with minimal required interaction with the system.

The opposite is true for medium- and high-risk offenders, he said, though securing service providers for these individuals can be more difficult because, by nature of their assessed risk level, their cases are generally more complex.

Baldwin said the commission continues to meet, and its next major focus will be tackling sentencing reform. A wide array of experts across the political spectrum contend that draconian drug laws have led to the explosion of the prison population by locking up addicts who would be better served by community sanctions, such as home arrest and probation, with a treatment component.

Many believe sentencing reform is how the state would make the biggest dent in reducing its prison population, but the issue is politically dicey, and previous efforts to implement broad reform have failed. Baldwin encouraged attendees of the drug conference to weigh in by writing to the members of the task force, and asking their legislators to support the recommendations when they are brought to the General Assembly.

The annual drug awareness meeting spanned Wednesday and Thursday. The day prior to Baldwin's talk, David Olson, co-director of Loyola's Center for Criminal Justice Research, Policy & Practice, told the group that when it comes to drug policies, society should be careful what it asks for.

That's because once lawmakers, reacting to a public outcry, put strict policies into place, they are very difficult to roll back. Olson explained that the federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 – and similar state laws that followed – was in response to reports about a rise in the use of crack cocaine, and heartbreaking stories about babies born drug dependent, harshly termed "crack babies." Politicians reacted, and those in law and order followed their marching orders to arrest and convict more drug abusers and dealers, he said.

The prison populations began to balloon, even though drug use was on the decline when the law was enacted, he said.

What's more, these drug laws have disproportionately affected African-Americans. Even though research shows that about the same percentage of blacks and whites use illegal drugs, blacks are far more likely to be arrested and serve prison time for drug-related offenses than are whites. At current, blacks are about 170 percent more likely to be convicted, and in the early 1990s, that figure was as high as 400 percent, said Olson, a leading state prison reform expert, and a member of the governor's commission.

"A lot of people describe this as the police being racially biased or racially profiling," he said. "The research that's out there indicates it's much more complex than that."

Among possible factors in the disparity, Olson said, is that law enforcement, under a new mandates to increase drug-related arrests, looked first where they were most aware of the illegal drug activity taking place in centralized locations.

That led them to poor African-American communities where drug dealing was often taking place relatively in the open, outside a housing project or on the sidewalk, he said. Drug abuse was just as likely in a white affluent suburban community, but such deals were more likely to take place behind closed doors, inside homes or workplaces and other places police were less familiar with, he said.

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