



# GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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To the Editor:

The Georgia Department of Corrections is responsible for the incarceration of nearly 60,000 adults, and the supervision of another 150,000 adults on felony probation. We employ nearly 15,000 people in order to accomplish our mission of protecting and serving the public. Indeed, if the Department of Corrections was a city, it would be the second largest city in the state, only Atlanta would be larger.

Nearly 90% of our \$1.1 billion annual budget is spent running prisons. It is no secret how we got here -- the ninth most populous state in the nation operating the fifth largest prison system in the country. The growth of the prison system is driven by mandatory sentences, arguably the most conservative parole board in the nation, and more recently the scourge of methamphetamine sweeping across our state. Without doubt Georgia is tough on crime, and that is as it should be. If we are afraid of them, if they are violent, repeat or predatory offenders we should lock them up until they are too old to ever re-offend again. On the other hand, if we are just mad at them, if they are committing property and drug offenses to feed their addictions, or perhaps some level of mental illness is involved, then we need to offer effective alternatives to our courts to address the disease itself, rather than just the symptoms.

We continue to "right size" the Department of Corrections by divesting ourselves of smaller, older, inefficient and expensive facilities. A portion of the savings from closing facilities will be reinvested into the expansion of two sentencing alternatives, day report centers and in-patient drug treatment centers.

Day Report Centers, as the name implies, are non-residential facilities where offenders report every day for up to nine months. Once assessed for their crime producing deficits, offenders are mandated to participate in a number of intervention strategies to include intensive drug treatment, vocational and educational training and criminal thinking programming. After a short period of orientation they are then required to work a job in the community. Offenders are drug tested frequently and surveillance officers check on them at night. Officers specially trained in supervising offenders with mental illness will provide the important link between the courts and the community. Offenders completing a Day Report Center program are far less likely to recidivate than offenders who spent several years in prison, and the cost to the taxpayer is about a fourth the cost of incarceration. Currently numbering six, we plan to expand by another ten in the coming year.

Another alternative targeted for expansion is the residential substance abuse treatment program located in secure facilities. This sentencing option provides judges with a more secure alternative for those offenders with deep and perhaps long term addiction difficulties. The next expansion of this program will occur at a facility in North West Georgia as an alternative to prison for those offenders facing primarily methamphetamine addiction. Offenders who complete the residential substance abuse program have a three year felony reconviction rate of 19%, compared to a 28% felony reconviction rate for offenders leaving prison without drug treatment.

Over the past three decades the national strategy to addressing crime has essentially been to build more prison capacity in a "one size fits all" approach. Today that approach costs Georgia taxpayers \$3 million per day to operate the Department of Corrections. And just as other fields like medicine and technology evolve, so must correctional strategies evolve. Today we need to be just as smart on crime as we are tough on crime.

Respectfully,

James E. Donald  
Commissioner  
Georgia Department of Corrections