

Mississippi Department of Corrections In Compliance For First Time In Fifteen Years

For the first time in fifteen years, the State of Mississippi's Department of Corrections (MDOC) is in compliance with prison overcrowding, and we are intent on remaining in compliance with the law. I appointed Robert Johnson as Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections in April of this year because he is an experienced law enforcement officer with leadership skills and the ability to implement the changes and improvements needed in the Mississippi penal system.

In less than a three-month period of time, Commissioner Johnson has brought prison overcrowding into compliance for the State of Mississippi, and we are now working together to develop long-term solutions to prison overcrowding in our state.

Together, we are investigating all viable options for both short and long-term solutions, and we will present those solutions to the Court on October 1st of this year.

Commissioner Johnson has focused his efforts on expediting the completion of the renovation of six buildings at Parchman's Unit 29. In May, 320 beds at Unit 29 were reopened. The other four buildings are expected to be opened, and fully operational in the month of August. Those buildings will provide an additional 550 beds, which will allow this facility to house a total of 880 new prisoners, thus helping to ease overcrowding.

A focus has also been placed on removing inmates from county jails. Next year, 1,250 new beds will be opened to house inmates. Of these new beds, 500 will be for youthful offenders and will be located in Walnut Grove. The balance will be dispersed in three new county/regional facilities located in Stone, Kemper and Holmes Counties.

The Mississippi Department of Corrections has more responsibilities than confining inmates. It is a diversified operation with broad responsibilities. MDOC provides inmate housing and security, hospitals for the sick and mentally ill, treatment for alcohol and drug addiction as well as adult basic education, therapeutic pre-release, vocational education, legal assistance, therapeutic recreation and religious programs.

The Department's work programs include facility maintenance, agriculture, construction, industry, mobile work crews and food preparation. At the South Mississippi Correctional Institution, inmates are developing projects that include vocational and academic schools, a chapel, a warehouse and training facilities. These programs are designed to teach skills and instill a sense of accomplishment and responsibility, and serve to help rehabilitate prisoners.

MDOC has been implementing alternative forms of incarceration when appropriate to help ease overcrowding problems. At the state's twelve Community Work Centers, inmates contribute hundreds of hours of labor to local governments. This equates to cost savings of three quarters of a million dollars from each center. Probationers, sentenced

by the court to Restitution Centers, are responsible for working to pay restitution for their crimes, living expenses and court costs. The Department is also increasing its intensive supervision program with electronic monitoring as an alternative to sentencing and incarceration for some inmates.

We are working to use every available means for effective and cost-efficient management of the MDOC to handle an expanding and diverse prison population. Those efforts coupled with our increasing efforts to prevent people from becoming incarcerated are providing solutions for the Mississippi prison system.

We are looking closely at our prison system, but we are also looking at what must be done to keep our highways and streets safe, what must be done to turn young lives away from jail and toward prosperous, fulfilling lives. Making Mississippi a safer place for our families to live, work and prosper is the driving force for our efforts, and we will continue to search for solutions that give our people the quality of life they deserve.