

ARTICLE PUBLISHED MAY 1, 2005

Prison population hits all-time high in Idaho Transfers, new prison or shorter sentences may be looked at

Idaho's prison population hit another all-time high Friday with 6,438 inmates behind bars, Department of Correction spokeswoman Teresa Jones said.

The climbing prison population puts pressure on the state to either build a new prison, ship inmates out of state or reduce prison sentences.

It also strains state spending as money that could otherwise be directed to public schools or social services is sapped by the demands of a growing prison business.

The state was expected to have 6,481 inmates behind bars as of June 30, the end of the state's budget year.

Last winter, the Legislature boosted the state prison budget by 7.3 percent, an increase driven almost entirely by the demand for prison space.

The \$118.5 million spending blueprint gives the agency \$2.5 million to build new prison housing, with most of the money directed at beds for the swelling female population.

Department director Tom Beauclair said in March the budget gives the agency just enough room to address the growing prison population for another year, but does little else.

And Jones said Friday, "We continue to look at all options and try to stretch our resources as much as we can." More than 150 inmates have agreed to participate in a temporary move to another state, if it becomes necessary. Jones said that could happen next April. But prison bosses have been able to push the date out as new beds are added to the prison system.

Beds being added to the Canyon County jail also are expected to help, Jones said.

Inmates agreed to participate for a number of reasons. She said some inmates are wishful for a move to a state that doesn't ban smoking. Others see a move as a break in the routine.

Gov. Dirk Kempthorne is expected to convene a special commission to examine criminal justice issues, with an eye toward sentence structures. It's one reason lawmakers rejected a pair of bills intended to reduce prison sentences.

Kempthorne spokesman Michael Journee said the governor is still in the process of selecting members to serve on the 20-member member panel. The group is expected to meet four times a year.