



## Corrections bill passes House

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FRANKFORT, Ky. — The Kentucky House passed sweeping legislation Thursday that aims to reverse the state's escalating prison population by steering more criminals into drug treatment and alternative sentences.

The verdict was swift and lopsided, as House members voted 97-2 in a bipartisan show of support for some of the biggest changes to Kentucky's penal code in decades. The measure - looming as one of the biggest potential accomplishments of the legislative session - now heads to the Republican-led Senate. The bill was touted as a way to ease the state's fast-rising corrections costs.

Supporters said the measure could reap \$422 million in savings over a decade. About half that amount would be reinvested to boost treatment programs and strengthen probation and parole.

The net savings is projected at \$147 million over 10 years.

Saddled with one of the nation's fastest-growing prison populations, Kentucky's taxpayer spending on corrections has soared by more than 300 percent since 1989, said House Judiciary Committee Chairman John Tilley, D-Hopkinsville.

"The economic climate is a crisis, drug addiction is a crisis - probably the two biggest crises in our commonwealth," said Tilley, who shepherded the bill through the House. "We addressed those issues in this bill."

Tilley touted the measure's efforts to improve drug treatment programs and beef up probation and parole as ways to reduce the state's prison headcount.

"We can turn many of our tax burdens into taxpayers," he said.

Underscoring the bill's high profile, Kentucky Chief Justice John D. Minton and Justice Secretary J. Michael Brown quickly hailed the House vote. They ventured onto the House floor after adjournment to congratulate Tilley.

Minton called it a "significant day" for Kentucky.

Brown said the bill includes intentional "lag time" to allow the state's justice system to prepare for the initiatives aimed at reducing prison populations and repeat offenders.

"Sometimes we pass a bill and say 'go figure out how to do it,'" he said. "This time we're saying some of the critical features have a delayed implementation date, strictly so that we can go ahead and get both the technical and the personnel on board so that when these individuals come into the programs we're ready for them."

The bill sparked limited debate, but one of those speaking up for it was Republican Floor Leader Jeff Hoover.

Hoover called it a "step in the right direction" for Kentucky. He especially praised the proposal to boost drug treatment programs for non-violent offenders.

"There's been little help for them within the criminal justice system," Hoover said.

Drug addiction has been a growing scourge in Kentucky, accounting for much of the rising prison population.

The bill proposes reducing prison time for low-risk, nonviolent offenders caught with small quantities of drugs. Savings would be redirected in treatment programs.

Efforts to better assess risks posed by offenders would be among changes in probation and parole policies. The bill also seeks to improve probation and parole supervision.

Tilley said the bill includes "swift and certain" sanctions for people caught violating their probation or parole.

He also assured that punishments would remain harsh for convictions related to such drugs as cocaine and methamphetamine.

The legislation is House Bill 463.

Read more: <http://www.kentucky.com/2011/02/17/1639491/corrections-bill-passes-house.html#more#ixzz1EK2uXkh8>