

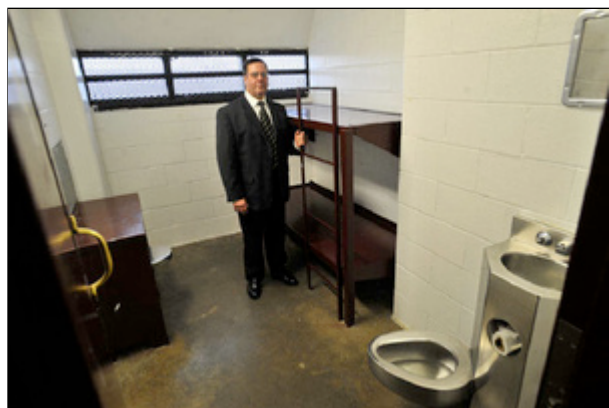
February 15

## [County mulls renting unused prison beds to the state](#)

**Situation shows steep drop in county prison populace. Prison board has yet to OK any deal.**

By [Jennifer Learn-Andesjandes@timesleader.com](mailto:Jennifer.Learn-Andesjandes@timesleader.com)  
Luzerne County Reporter

Luzerne County officials are thinking about renting unused prison beds to the state to generate revenue – a turnaround for a county that used to dish out hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to house inmates outside the area due to overcrowding.

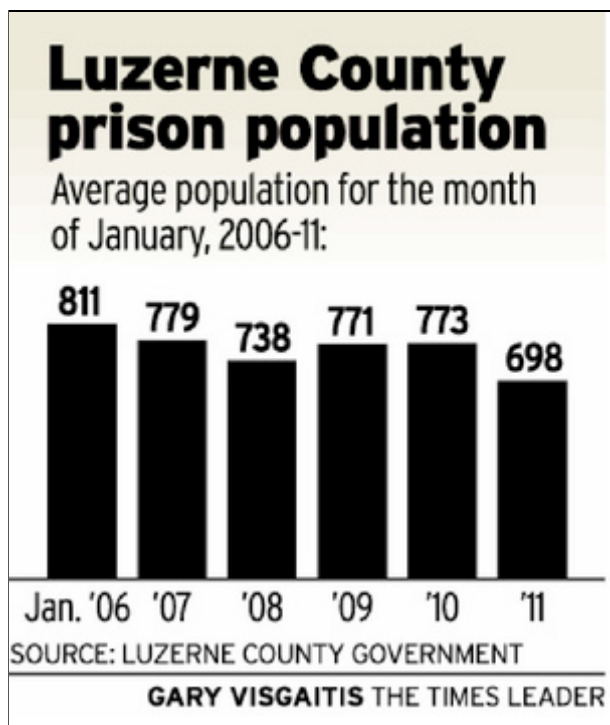


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Luzerne County Prison Warden Joe Piazza would like to rent out unused cells at the Wilkes-Barre facility.

S. John Wilkin/The Times Leader

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Prison Warden Joseph Piazza said during Monday's county prison board meeting that the state has agreed to pay \$60 a day per inmate. He estimated he could rent out up to 75 beds – 50 male and 25 female – at the county prison.

The average daily inmate population in Luzerne County's prison complex last month was 698 – a reduction of 75 from the previous January average.

The January average had reached a high of 811 in 2006, decreasing to 779 in 2007, 738 in 2008 and 771 in 2009.

Piazza made prison population reduction one of his main focuses when he was hired as warden in early 2009. He attributes much of the decrease to faster inmate processing and increased use of alternative sentencing programs, including a day reporting center that keeps non-violent offenders out of the prison.

An average 60 inmates were in the day reporting center in January, saving the county \$97,100 for the month after costs, according to statistics released Monday.

The population decline has ended discussion about building a new \$100 million-plus, 1,500-bed prison – a proposal that was put on the back burner in light of the county's financial troubles.

The Prison Board has not yet authorized Piazza to enter into a rental agreement with the state.

Board member Maryanne Petrilla, also a commissioner, said she would support the renting of beds only for state inmates who were from the area.

Petrilla said she fears that if state inmates from other areas are brought here, it might encourage them to stay here after they are released.

"I think we need to be very cautious. We can't risk having the same problems that Hazleton is experiencing now with the MinSec situation," she said.

Downtown Hazleton businesspeople have been airing concerns about MinSec, a state-contracted facility for inmates transitioning out of the prison system. More than 30 incidents involving crimes allegedly committed by current or former MinSec inmates have been documented in the area since the facility opened in 2008.

Prison Board member Stephen A. Urban, also a commissioner, said he'd want to see if the state would pay more than \$60, because the county spends \$94 per inmate per day. He also wants to know if the county would have the right to screen and determine which state inmates are lodged here.

"When they get out, they'd have a tendency to stay here, rather than go home. You don't know what criminal element you're going to get," Urban said.

Prison Board member Walter Griffith, the county controller, said the state should be required to pay the \$94 per inmate because that's what it costs the county in staffing, food, utilities and other overhead.

The county should also examine the potential to reduce prison staffing, Griffith said.

"I thought the whole purpose to bring the population down was to reduce the staff and save the taxpayers money. If we have fewer people in the jail, can we get away with less staff?"

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