

Radio Iowa

Iowa prison population tops 9,000

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Corrections Department office in Des Moines.

Iowa's prison population, for the first time ever, topped 9,000 inmates over the weekend. There were 8,200 inmates just one year ago. Iowa Department of Corrections Director John Baldwin expects the numbers to drop again soon.

"It was truly one of those perfect storms," Baldwin said about the boom in Iowa's prison population. "The Parole Board, which is the releasing authority, had three of its five members leave in a very short span. It takes three votes to release anybody from prison, so when you only have two (members) left, it's very difficult to keep the releases coming."

Iowa's nine prisons are now 25% over capacity. While the number of inmates has been rising, the number of correctional officers has been dropping. The current ratio of officers to inmates is 1 to 5.69. Baldwin says there's no "ideal ratio."

"It is so dependent on what that offender population looks like – whether it's minimum, medium or maximum (security), whether there are mental health issues, if it's closed custody or an open-type setting," Baldwin said. "It really does vary...it depends on so many other factors."

A key Democratic lawmaker warned Monday that Iowa's prisons could run out of money at the end of May if lawmakers fail to reach agreement on a supplemental appropriation requested by Governor Branstad. Senator Tom Hancock of Epworth is chair of the Senate's Justice Systems Budget Subcommittee. Baldwin says he's not sure how many prison employees would be laid off if the funding isn't approved.

"Clearly, if the end of May comes around and we don't have the supplemental, we're going to have some serious conversations about what our options are," Baldwin said. Despite the budgetary and population concerns, Baldwin says he's not especially worried about the safety of Iowa's prison inmates and staff. He says the corrections department is doing its job of reducing the inmate population by improving the return rate of ex-prisoners.

“We have dropped down to a 32 percent recidivism rate. It wasn’t that long ago, 10 or 12 years, we were hovering around 38 or 39 percent,” Baldwin said. “So, clearly what we have done has had an impact on the people who used to come back us and are being kept out in Iowa’s communities.”

Nearly 40% of Iowa’s prison inmates have been diagnosed with a mental illness. Baldwin says that percentage has been rising and he hopes lawmakers will take that under consideration as they discuss a possible overhaul of the delivery of mental health services in Iowa.

“Corrections has to even further its efforts on training our staff to make sure they understand someone with mental illness acts differently than a ‘normal or typical’ offender that we were used to having 15 or 20 years ago,” Baldwin said. Governor Branstad said Monday that he expects the State of Iowa will gradually take over the delivery of mental health services.

Iowa’s 99 counties currently manage and pay for much of the mental health care that’s available in Iowa. Baldwin made his comments on the Iowa Public Radio program The Exchange.

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