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State leaders may steer more inmates to local jails

By David Damron, Orlando Sentinel

8:53 PM EDT, March 26, 2011

County jails across Florida saw inmate populations dip during the recession, a rare budgetary bright spot for local governments struggling to keep correction costs under control.

But state leaders are considering measures to scale back or cut state and local pretrial release programs that could funnel more prisoners into local lockups.

Gov. Rick Scott has proposed shifting a \$4.4 million state pretrial intervention program to local public-safety officials, and separate bills pending in the Legislature would curb county-based pretrial release options.

Both moves, if adopted, could mean more inmates staying longer in county jails, said Sarrah K. Carroll, who tracks public-safety issues for the Florida Association of Counties.

"We know that is going to increase our costs," Carroll said.

In Florida, county jail populations dropped from an average of 62,470 in September 2009 to 59,440 in 2010, recent state data shows. In Orange, similar declines allowed officials to recently close one of the jail's oldest sections, a move that could save a projected \$2.8 million in overtime costs, officials say.

Experts point to a various possible factors in the inmate-population declines, a national trend that could be the result of an aging population, fewer violent crimes and better policing, sentencing and pretrial release programs.

The fight over the county programs centers on certain inmates considered minimal risks — people arrested on first-time drunken driving or minor theft charges and other nonviolent crimes. They often are offered release from jail — without having to post bail — while they await hearings.

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Twenty-eight counties offer such options, with various levels of supervision. Orange's program has come under fire from the bail-bond industry in recent years, with critics arguing it could result in dangerous criminals getting out of jail before trial.

The bail-bond industry is supporting a bill sponsored by state Rep. Chris Dorworth, R-Lake Mary, that would limit such programs to indigent offenders. Dorworth could not be reached for comment.

Local jail and judicial officials argue these local programs save money by reducing jail crowding and give less-affluent people the same chance to get out of jail that people who can post bail have.

But the bail-bond industry contends that requiring defendants to post a payment to get released while awaiting trial better ensures they show up for a court date.

The industry has another reason to back Dorworth's proposal because "bail bondsmen are likely to see an increase in revenue if the bill becomes law," a legislative staff analysis of the measure states.

Orange County's public-affairs director Mark Jefferies said that curbing the local pre-trial release program could mean an average of 274 more inmates staying in its jail each day. As of Friday, Orange's holding facility had 3,313 inmates, with a capacity of 4,105.

"Extra costs are extra costs," Jefferies said. "That would be pretty hefty."

The bill filed by Dorworth, and a companion Senate measure, are expected to be heard by committees in both houses, one as early as Monday in the Senate.

The separate Department of Corrections pretrial intervention program Scott wants to shift to local officials could emerge in the House and Senate budgets soon, Carroll said.

Eliminating that state pretrial intervention program could shift as many as 19,000 inmates to local jails, she said.

Without it, Orange would have seen 699 offenders steered to its local jail, officials say.

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