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Idaho ends its run as the state of prisons

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A year ago, Idaho sent hundreds of its criminal offenders out of state.

Last week, the last of those inmates came home.

That's the latest development in a policy that has seen Idaho halt and slightly reverse what had been one of the fastest-growing prison populations in the United States. Credit belongs in part to dwindling state revenues. Idaho can't afford to build new prisons. But credit also belongs to a more enlightened approach to handling offenders whose drug addiction or mental illness placed them in the criminal justice system in the first place.

A year ago, Idaho's prisons were so overcrowded that it lacked space for 722 inmates. So they wound up in prisons operated in places such as Oklahoma and Texas.

It was expensive. These states billed Idaho \$61 a day for its prisoners. Holding someone in an Idaho penitentiary costs about \$40 a day.

It was dangerous. Idaho lost two inmates - one to murder, another to suicide - at private prisons in Texas where the guards were poorly trained and too few in number.

It was more difficult for Idaho to supervise how these inmates were treated.

It was ineffective. Rehabilitation programs were inadequate.

And it isolated an Idaho inmate from his family. Having regular visits and the assurance of a support network outside is vital to someone who eventually will return to society.

Making the transfer possible, in part, was the opening of 628 beds at the privately-managed Idaho Correctional Center. But the real story that began a year ago was the drop in how many people this state sends to prison.

Last year, that number stood at 7,338. Had trends then in place continued, Idaho would have had 7,563 today and 7,854 a year from now.

Instead, the state prisons hold 7,266.

Some of that reflects falling crime rates, although Idaho managed to increase its prison population throughout a decade of falling crime.

What's taken hold is a new philosophy at each end of the system. At the front, judges have diverted offenders into drug and mental health courts, getting them treatment and keeping them in the community.

At the back, the state Department of Correction has provided more resources for inmate rehabilitation, substance abuse counseling and education, thereby enabling the parole board to release more inmates.

Probation and Parole also has implemented a more lenient policy toward parolees who break the terms of their release without committing a new crime. Such technical violations often equaled a trip back to prison. Now a technical parole violation may provoke a more calibrated response.

All of which yielded a dividend last week for these inmates, their families and the Idaho taxpayer. - M.T.