

Prison firm no longer profits at Idaho's expense

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

As of this week, the Idaho Department of Correction is running the Idaho Correctional Center outside of Boise.

Gone is Corrections Corporation of America, the Nashville, Tenn.-based contractor that in 14 years transformed ICC into the violence-plagued "gladiator school."

Gone are the myriad lawsuits.

Gone are the falsified time slips that overbilled the state for unworked shifts - which produced a federal contempt of court citation and triggered an ongoing federal criminal investigation.

Gov. C.L (Butch) Otter's reluctant decision to reassign the prison to public management frees Idaho from CCA's predatory business model. As Prison Legal News' Alex Friedmann noted, CCA last year earned \$300 million on gross revenues of \$1.69 billion - or about a 17.6 percent profit margin.

None of the "savings" went to state or county budgets. None of it went to taxpayers. All of it went into CCA's corporate coffers.

Making that kind of money requires private companies to scrimp on staff salaries and training, which leads to higher turnover, less security and more violence.

Relying on a private company leaves Idahoans more in the dark and exposes their elected leaders to for-profit contractors' influence peddlers. With a prison contract to defend, CCA and its competitors spread cash around to Idaho politicians. For instance, CCA gave about \$20,000 to Otter's re-election campaign and hired his former chief of staff, Jason Kreizenbeck, as one of its lobbyists.

With so much invested, no private prison contractor would willingly undermine demand for its product - in this case, prison beds.

Of course, none of this necessarily benefited you, the taxpayer.

Short term, you may have paid more to have CCA on board. Studies in Idaho, Arizona and Michigan all pointed toward prison contractors cherrypicking the healthiest inmates who were least costly to incarcerate while the state was left to handle more expensive prisoners.

And long term, you'll pay because the people released from privately run prisons are prone to reoffend. Minnesota's study found inmates in a privately managed correctional institution were more likely to be rearrested, reconvicted, commit new crimes and violate parole.

Any prison - private or public - involves locking people up and confining them in a less-than-ideal setting. Violence, escapes and contraband are facts of life. So are overcrowding and a dearth of rehabilitation resources.

Someone who emerges from a prison often is better suited for crime than when he entered.

But for the first time in 14 years, ICC management's primary goal won't be making money for far-off shareholders.

Instead, it will focus on maintaining public safety - by keeping dangerous people off the streets, maintaining order within the prison and releasing inmates who are less likely to commit new crimes.

For the first time in 14 years, the people working at ICC will be more likely to view work as a career, not just a job.

And for the first time in 14 years, nobody in a far-off corporate headquarters will hold it against a warden if the number of people Idaho incarcerates stabilizes or even declines. Nobody is going to use lobbying or campaign contributions to further the interests of private prison firms.

That's not to say the problems at ICC are instantaneously going to disappear. You're talking about changing a laxer, less-secure prison culture under CCA's tenure that some inmates may prefer.

But after a long, dark chapter, Idaho has cast aside a profit motive more suited to making widgets or selling hamburgers than to warehousing human beings. - M.T.