

More states comply with federal rules to stop prison rape

REBECCA BOONE, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — All but four states have either met or are working toward meeting federal guidelines intended to prevent prison rape, the U.S. Department of Justice says.

Idaho, Arkansas, Alaska and Utah continue to reject the federal rules, according to the department's latest list of states that are compliant with the Prison Rape Elimination Act.

The updated list, released last week, reports that 10 states say they are fully compliant with the rules: Iowa, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oregon, Tennessee and Washington. Twenty-five more states have given the federal government formal assurances that they are actively working toward full compliance.

The federal law has several requirements that range from increased training of staff about sex-abuse policies to screening new inmates to determine if they are likely to commit sexual assault or to be assaulted. Inmates must also be able to report assaults to a rape crisis center or other organization outside the prison system, and suspected assaults must be thoroughly investigated and, when possible, perpetrators must be criminally charged.

Several states have changed their stance on the law. Last year, a handful of governors told U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder that they wouldn't try to meet the federal standards, some arguing the law represented federal overreach or would simply cost too much. Now-former Texas Gov. Rick Perry was one of the most vocal opponents at the time, urging other states to join Texas in rejecting the rules.

But in May, recently elected Texas Gov. Greg Abbott promised that while some of the audits required under the Prison Rape Elimination Act are still underway, the state would use at least 5 percent of its federal prison funding toward becoming fully compliant with the law wherever feasible. Indiana, which also rejected the law last year, has submitted a similar assurance.

Officials in Idaho and Arkansas contend that their states have a zero-tolerance policy toward sexual abuse behind bars, and governors in both states say they support what they consider to be the best practices outlined in the Prison Rape Elimination Act's rules. But both states have stopped short of agreeing to comply with the federal rules. Idaho corrections officials told the Justice Department last month that the state has created its own new rules that closely mirror — but don't match — the federal guidelines.

Federal statistics show about 216,000 adult and juvenile inmates are sexually assaulted each year, compared with about 238,000 people living outside of correction facilities in the U.S.

"The continuing effort among states to implement the PREA standards is an encouraging sign. If these states' implementation is full and meaningful, it will result in a dramatic reduction in sexual abuse behind bars," Lovisa Stannow, executive director of the prisoner-rights group Just Detention

International, said in a prepared statement. "Sexual violence in detention is preventable. It's the duty of government officials to keep all inmates safe."

Copyright 2015 The Associated Press