

Long since time for Idaho to give CCA the boot

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Here's a milestone worth celebrating: In about two months, the last of Idaho's 173 inmates held at the Kit Carson Correctional Center at Burlington, Colo., will return home.

Last week, Idaho Corrections Director Kevin Kempf told the Legislature's budget-writing committee the declining state prison population has allowed him to take that step.

"Every one of our inmates that's sitting in a private prison in Colorado right now will be back in the state of Idaho in the next 60 days - they're all coming back," Kempf said.

The cause is good news. Idaho has inched toward more enlightened policies that divert offenders from the prison's front gate - as well as rehabilitation and parole reforms that are aimed at successfully helping people rejoin society. That's brought inmate population numbers down to levels the state can handle within its own capacity.

The effect, however, is even better.

Kit Carson is run by Corrections Corporation of America.

Yes, that CCA.

Thought Idaho supposedly severed ties with CCA?

It sure looked that way in 2014.

By then, the state's 18-year-long partnership with CCA had yielded a bitter harvest. CCA's management of the Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise - for which it received \$29.9 million a year - had earned the violence-plagued prison the nationally recognized moniker "Gladiator School."

Inmate-on-inmate violence was so common that the courts stepped in - even to the extent of a federal judge issuing a contempt citation.

Critics blamed a business model where profits were maximized by trimming staffing levels - which came to a head when the state learned CCA had billed taxpayers for unworked shifts.

That embarrassed CCA's political ally, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. His Republican appointees on the state Board of Correction opted not to renew CCA's contract but stopped short of a full accounting and accepted a \$1 million settlement many believed fell short.

Meanwhile, Otter's appointee at the Idaho State Police, Col. Ralph Powell, never carried out a criminal investigation he was asked to undertake. U.S. Attorney Wendy Olson and the FBI later opened their own probe - but found no violation of federal law.

"There were a number of other actions or matters that may be of concern to the state agencies or to the voters or whatever," Olson said.

But at least ICC - since renamed the Idaho State Correctional Center - was now under the management and control of a state correction department that answered to the public, not the corporate bottom line.

So why in the world was Idaho still doing business with CCA, paying that company \$55.17 a day to house up to 750 prisoners in Colorado? When Senate Democratic Leader Michelle Stennett asked about it last fall, she was told the state paid CCA about \$4.6 million last year.

You'll hear Idaho had few good choices. It had more inmates than prison beds, so it had to select among CCA and its competitors - none of which has a spotless record.

Even some of CCA's skeptics give the company good marks for its performance in Colorado - although they're inclined to credit Gov. John Hickenlooper's administration for keeping a tight rein on the contractor.

But as long as Idaho was doing any business with CCA, you had the nagging sense the contractor would build on that relationship. Memories are short. Five or 10 years from now, CCA might worm its way back into the Gem State.

Kempf's announcement means for the first time since 1997, Idaho is free from CCA.

Why not keep it that way?