

# CCA leaves Idaho, but its influence lingers

Marty Trillaase/Lewiston Tribune

Now that the Idaho Board of Correction need no longer look after Corrections Corp. of America, perhaps it can begin taking better care of you.

More than three months ago, that board - and by extension, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter - yanked CCA's \$29 million contract to manage the violence-plagued Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise. But while correction board Chairwoman Robin Sandy was willing to consider a new bid from CCA and its competitors, she forbade the Idaho Department of Correction from submitting its own proposal to run the state-owned prison.

Things have gone from bad to worse for CCA ever since.

It got caught falsifying its time slips, a practice that momentarily concealed the contractor's understaffing of the prison. A new lawsuit alleged it had turned over security to some prison gangs - who then beat up other inmates. And U.S. District Court Judge David O. Carter imposed a contempt of court citation. For the next two years, Carter put the contractor under the thumb of an impartial monitor and threatened escalating fines if the company failed to meet its staffing targets.

Friday, CCA pulled out. It won't submit a new bid for the ICC and will leave Idaho - which means we'll never know if the contractor could still make a decent profit while shelling out the kind of money needed to fully staff the prison.

What we do know is the universe of companies that manage prisons is incredibly small.

Based in Nashville, Tenn., CCA has about 44.3 percent of the market - larger than the next two companies combined. Those are The GEO Group, headquartered in Boca Raton, Fla., with 31.1 percent, and Management and Training Corp., out of Centerville, Utah, which controls 12.4 percent.

With the biggest player out and the competition limited to two or three smaller contractors, what are the odds that Idaho will pay the next ICC manager more?

If Idaho's experience with CCA is any indication, the private prison business model drains profits out of state by scrimping on staffing - resulting in increased inmate-on-inmate violence.

Still unanswered is whether the Idaho taxpayer is getting fleeced in the process.

An Associated Press study in Idaho - as well as another review of operations in Arizona - indicated private contractors don't save taxpayers any money. In fact, they may cost more because by taking on only the healthier and more compliant inmates, contractors leave more-

expensive prisoners for the state to handle. As a modern prison, ICC has cost-saving technologies that would benefit any manager, public or private.

The only way to find out for sure is to get a benchmark of what the state would spend.

Case in point: The state of Michigan explored private and public estimates for the housing of 968 prisoners. The lowest private bid came in at \$18.6 million.

Michigan's Department of Correction could do the job for \$12.9 million.

Why wouldn't Idaho get the same information?

One theory is ideology. As the AP's Rebecca Boone noted last week, Otter has been pushing to expand prison privatization in Idaho, not retract it.

But here's one more: CCA may be leaving Idaho, but the last thing this politically wired company wants is a headline-grabbing story showing how Idaho ended up saving money by taking over its own prison.

Thanks to CCA's handling of the "gladiator school," the Idaho prison has a national profile. Politicians and taxpayers in other states where CCA - and its competitors - continue doing business might be watching. - M.T.