

## **Democratic lawmakers say Idaho should ditch private prisons**

By REBECCA BOONE, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Two Democratic state lawmakers want Idaho to sever all ties with private prison companies and say they will pursue legislation on the issue next year, according to a letter sent Wednesday.

Reps. John Gannon and Mat Erpelding made the request in their letter to the Idaho Board of Correction, contending the move is needed because of a recent FBI investigation into prison contractor Corrections Corp. of America and in light of Idaho's history with such private companies.

Despite reports of excessive violence, chronic understaffing and other management problems, board members opted to continue renewing CCA's contract to run the state's largest prison until Otter ordered the state to take over the facility last year.

The U.S. Department of Justice announced last week that investigators didn't find evidence of a federal criminal violation but did discover miscommunication problems and other issues with the state correction department and Idaho State Police.

The lawmakers said the board and Department of Correction have done an excellent job of taking over the Idaho Correctional Center near Boise that was previously run by Corrections Corp. of America

They also praised efforts the department has made to raise pay levels in hopes of reducing staff turnover.

"However, in view of revelations from the United States attorney investigation and the entire history of the relationship, we believe the department needs to develop and implement a plan to completely get out of the private prison business," the lawmakers wrote.

Idaho ended its \$29 million annual contract with CCA to run the Boise prison after the state learned company employees had falsified staffing reports to cover up thousands of hours' worth of vacant guard posts.

However, Idaho still pays nearly \$4.5 million to CCA to house about 210 inmates at the Kit Carson Correctional Center in Colorado. Another private prison company, Management Training Corp., is paid nearly \$10 million a year in taxpayer money to operate the 432-bed Correctional Alternative Placement Program prison near Boise.

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter has declined to comment on the results of the FBI investigation and the letter to the board. Otter's spokesman, Mark Warbis, said they hadn't yet seen the letter and that the FBI investigation speaks for itself.

Idaho Department of Correction Director Kevin Kempf was out of the office and couldn't immediately be reached for comment.

Department spokesman Jeff Ray said the agency's priority is to provide housing for inmates that protects public safety at a reasonable cost to taxpayers.

"The department currently has 210 inmates out of state. In a perfect world, they would all be home here in Idaho," Ray said, because inmates who maintain contact with loved ones are less likely to re-offend. "We look forward to the day when we can bring them home."

Ray said members of the board had not yet seen the letter, but they expected to discuss it with Kempf soon.

In their letter, Gannon and Erpelding cited a 2013 written opinion from the Idaho attorney general's office about the suitability of private prison contracts. In the opinion, the office stated that before renewing or entering a private prison contract, the board should consider several factors including whether there is room in state facilities for the inmates, if appropriate staffing will be available, and any other social and economic impacts such a contract might have.

"Clearly the private prison experiment has failed in Idaho and because of that failure there appear to be impediments to continuing that policy," the representatives wrote.

Democratic lawmakers have urged the state to end prison privatization before, but those efforts haven't garnered much response from the Republican-controlled Legislature or the board.

However, current members of the board are all fairly new — Dr. David McClusky was appointed in January 2013, and Chairwoman Debbie Field and Cindy Wilson were both appointed earlier this year. The letter from Gannon and Erpelding may represent the first opportunity the current board members have to delve into the issue publicly.

The Board of Correction has not yet announced its next meeting date.

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