



Florida's Corrections Crisis: The Urgent Need for a Criminal Justice Commission

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In December 2023, Florida spent \$2.3 million on a report to develop a master plan for the state's prison system. KPMG assessed the current state of Florida's corrections system and outlined necessary improvements for the next 20 years. The report provided a clear roadmap to addressing the Department of Corrections' most pressing challenges. Among the many solutions outlined, two priorities demand immediate attention: workforce shortages and facilities planning. Additionally, the state must leverage the expertise of independent professionals to implement these changes. A Criminal Justice Commission, modeled after those in Texas, Ohio, and Georgia, could serve as the mechanism to develop a sustainable long-term strategy.

The report identified an urgent need for \$2.2 billion in capital improvements and the immediate hiring of thousands of employees. The analysis centered on three major areas:

1. Infrastructure deterioration and modernization needs. Leaking roofs, lack of air conditioning, corroded doors, insufficient plumbing, broken windows, and crumbling stucco all compromise safety and security. Seventeen of the state's 50 facilities were built before 1980.
2. Financial concerns related to infrastructure and staffing. The report highlighted unpredictable spending due to excessive overtime costs and the financial burden of maintaining aging facilities, which complicates both short-term and long-term planning.
3. The growing incarcerated and aging population. The demand for health care services has increased, leading the Florida Legislature to allocate approximately \$688 million for inmate health care in its 2024-25 budget, an \$11 million increase from the previous year. The Florida Policy Project has identified best practices for addressing the needs of veterans and seniors, including digital literacy, workforce training, and early release programs.

In response, Florida has taken initial steps, including increasing correctional officer salaries and committing \$100 million annually for 30 years to repair and maintain facilities. However, this is merely a starting point. Immediate action is necessary, as underscored by Secretary Ricky Dixon's recent statements before the Florida House and Senate committees. Dixon reported that 58% of correctional officers have fewer than two years of experience, and 70% have less than three years.

"That keeps me up at night," Dixon said. "The inmates have much more experience than they do."

Florida's growing inmate population, combined with deteriorating facilities and staffing shortages, will soon create a crisis of insufficient capacity and security risks.

The Case for a Criminal Justice Commission

Despite public concern over crime, there is little political momentum to address the systemic issues within Florida's Department of Corrections (DOC). Once felons are convicted and sentenced, public attention wanes. As a result, the prison system operates as a triage unit—patching immediate problems without long-term planning.

The Florida Policy Project revisited the KPMG report with a focus on implementing sustainable solutions. An independent commission is the best way to ensure long-term strategic planning for the DOC. Given that the DOC is Florida's largest agency, with a \$3.4 billion budget and approximately 24,000 employees, a dedicated body is needed to oversee facilities planning, staff recruitment and retention, and program effectiveness.

A commission would include appointments from the department secretary, attorney general, legislative leaders, and the governor, with additional seats for academic researchers, community advocates, and elected legislators.

Staffing Shortages: A Critical Weakness

"Everything we do well and everything we don't comes down to good quality staffing," said DOC Secretary Ricky Dixon before the House Justice Budget Committee on Feb. 4, 2025.

Recruiting and retaining officers is the department's most immediate challenge. Without adequate staffing, many of the recommendations in the KPMG report cannot be implemented. Increasing prison capacity without increasing staff would be futile, as the DOC is already struggling to fill existing positions.

Currently, the DOC offers more than 1,200 inmate programs aimed at reducing recidivism, improving inmate welfare, and preparing inmates for reintegration into society. However, due to staffing shortages, only 15% of inmates participate. Even when instructors and support staff are available, safety concerns prevent programs from running at full capacity.

The staffing shortage has become so severe that in 2022, Gov. Ron DeSantis deployed members of the Florida National Guard to assist in state prisons. Nearly 300 Guard members remain stationed at DOC facilities.

Inadequate staffing leads to safety risks, excessive overtime, burnout, and high turnover. Many officers leave for better-paying jobs at sheriff's offices or in the private sector. The DOC's stagnant staffing levels have not kept pace with the growing inmate population, exacerbating the crisis.

"This overtime issue is not going away, it's just going to continue to escalate," Dixon warned.

Prison Facilities and Infrastructure: A Looming Crisis

"The state has accumulated approximately \$2.2 billion in immediate needs and \$6 billion in total capital costs to address the issues in the institutions it currently operates for the next 20 years," the December 2023 KPMG report stated.

While Gov. DeSantis and the Legislature have committed \$100 million annually for 30 years, this amount

falls far short of meeting urgent infrastructure needs. KPMG identified that more than one-third of DOC facilities are in poor or critical condition. The recommended \$6.2 billion for new construction is necessary to replace failing facilities and accommodate Florida's growing inmate population.

Reducing Recidivism: A Smart Investment

Prison reform does not mean being lenient on crime. The Nolan Center for Justice at the American Conservative Union Foundation highlights Texas as a model for reducing prison populations while improving public safety. Since implementing reform, Texas has:

- Saved over \$2 billion by reducing prison populations.
- Seen a 29% drop in crime rates—the lowest since 1968.
- Closed ten prisons due to effective reforms, saving millions in operating costs.

Florida, by contrast, is experiencing a steady increase in incarceration. If the DOC continues to operate without long-term solutions, this trend will persist.

Programs that improve digital literacy, workforce readiness, and early release opportunities could significantly reduce recidivism. UCF's Thomas Baker emphasizes that effective reforms require long-term investment.

"These people should be getting rehabilitated," Baker said. "Then we would need fewer facilities and fewer staff."

Independent Commission: The Way Forward

The DOC is overwhelmed by daily operational challenges, making it impossible to execute and develop a 20-year strategic plan without outside support. A Criminal Justice Commission could ensure oversight and planning, including:

- Strategic location of new prisons. Many of Florida's prisons are in rural areas, where staffing shortages are most severe. A commission could evaluate alternative locations.
- Long-term infrastructure planning. A dedicated body could ensure that investments in repairs and new construction are aligned with Florida's evolving needs.
- Staffing and retention strategies. Examining national best practices could improve recruitment and retention, addressing the ongoing staffing crisis.

The Florida Department of Corrections is operating under immense strain, with a growing inmate population, deteriorating facilities, and severe staffing shortages. Without immediate intervention, the system will face an unmanageable crisis. Florida must act now by forming a Criminal Justice Commission to develop long-term solutions that enhance safety, reduce recidivism, and improve fiscal responsibility. The time for temporary fixes is over—Florida needs lasting reform.