

For Immediate Release
Thursday, January 21, 2019

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Colorado Lawmakers to Tackle Prison Capacity and Criminal Justice Reforms Friday at Joint Judiciary Committee Hearing

Statements below from Senate and House sponsors of SB19-143, a recently introduced bill to alleviate prison population issues; advocates are also urging lawmakers to address drug sentencing, a major driver of Colorado's prison overcrowding and nearly \$1 billion prison budget

DENVER — Colorado lawmakers will tackle prison capacity and criminal justice reforms Friday at a joint Judiciary Committee hearing that will include briefings from the Department of Corrections, Office of State Planning and Budget, and Joint Budget Committee staff. The hearing is scheduled to take place upon adjournment in the Old State Library of the Colorado State Capitol Building.

State lawmakers are exploring ways in which Colorado can alleviate prison overcrowding. As of January 31, the DOC vacancy rate was just 0.7 percent, but it is supposed to be kept to 2-5 percent to maintain a safe environment for inmates and staff.

One of the proposed bills expected to be addressed is SB19-143, which was introduced Friday by Sen. Julie Gonzales and Rep. Leslie Herod. It seeks to alleviate prison population issues through changes to the parole system and increased support services for people leaving prison. For example, it would make it more difficult to deny parole to “low risk” inmates with approved parole plans, and it would prevent people from being sent back to prison for certain parole violations. A summary and the full text of the bill are available at <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb19-143>.

With the state's corrections budget nearing \$1 billion, criminal justice reform advocates are urging state lawmakers to explore alternatives to opening more prisons. According to [a report released earlier this month](#) by the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition, the state's current penalties for simple drug possession are a driver of Colorado's prison population and budget. Annual drug felony case filings have more than doubled since 2012, during which time the state's prison budget has grown by more than 25 percent.

“This is a complex issue, but there are some simple actions the General Assembly could take this session to produce immediate and long-term benefits,” the report reads. “Specifically, it could alleviate the upward pressure drug felony filings are placing on the state’s prison population by reducing the penalty for simple drug possession from a felony to a misdemeanor — a proposal that most Coloradans would prefer over opening another prison ... The Legislature could also move more aggressively to develop strategies that support recovery and stability and address current gaps in treatment access and affordable housing.”

“In addition to improving the parole system and support services for inmates exiting prison, the state should explore options for safely reducing the number of people being sentenced to prison to begin with,” said CCJRC Executive Director Christie Donner. “One way to do this is to stop imprisoning people for simple drug possession or reincarcerating people on parole who relapse. Coloradans overwhelmingly agree that prevention and treatment would be a better approach than incarceration, and our laws and funding priorities should reflect that.”

The report included results of a January poll that found four out of five Colorado voters want the state to focus more on prevention and treatment and less on punishment and incarceration when it comes to addressing issues related to drug use. It also found 63 percent of Colorado voters think the Legislature should lower the penalty for drug possession rather than opening another prison.

WHAT: Joint hearing of the Colorado House and Senate Judiciary committees regarding prison capacity and criminal justice reforms

WHEN: Friday, February 22, Upon Adjournment

WHERE: Old State Library on the second floor of the Colorado State Capitol Building, 200 E. Colfax Ave., Denver

WHO: Public testimony will be heard and briefings will be provided by the Department of Corrections, Office of State Planning and Budget, and Joint Budget Committee staff

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The Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition is a non-profit organization dedicated to eliminating the overuse of the criminal justice system and advancing community health and safety. For more information, visit <https://www.ccjrc.org>.