

IPEA's Legislative priority for 2012 session

PRISON PRIVATIZATION

PROBLEM:

The Idaho Department of Corrections has contracted with a private company, Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) to provide supervision of Idaho's prisoners. The stated reasoning behind privatization was to provide better services at lower cost. CCA, however, is not providing better service (note recent lawsuits, etc) and cost savings are insignificant.

SOLUTION:

Pass legislation to forbid the state from privatizing prisons, and ending the contract between the State of Idaho and CCA.

RATIONALE:

IPEA's Priority 2 in our Political Action Platform is privatization vs public workforce. Following are the reasons IPEA is generally opposed to privatization:

1. Government is responsible to provide service, not make profits.
2. Regulatory oversight is better when using public employees.
3. Public employees are responsible to the public (taxpayers) rather than a corporate board.
4. Privatization always starts with the "lowest bid", thus lowering the quality of service.
5. Privatization lacks accountability and tends to be more expensive for a lower quality of work.
6. Private contractors are for-profit, thus they sacrifice quality by cutting costs.
7. Privatization does not utilize the experience and knowledge of current public employees.
8. Privatization leads to unemployed public employees and more pressure on private employers, pushing wages down for all employees.

At IPEA, we believe that there are many services that simply do not lend themselves to privatization, and the incarceration of prisoners is at the top of the list. There simply is no good reason to introduce a profit motive into locking up people.

Private prisons such as CCA are incentivized to *increase* prison populations, rather than *decrease* prison populations. When more people are locked up, private prison profits increase. CCA has several prisons in Arizona. It is well documented that CCA was intimately involved in passing Arizona's very tough anti-immigration legislation. CCA has every reason to want to see more undocumented workers locked up because those prison populations tend to be non-problematic, low-cost prisoners to house. Some private prisons also work to toughen drug laws and "three strike" type laws for the same reason. Conversely, state-run prisons have a motive to *decrease* prison population, and thus save taxpayer money.

Private prisons run a profit oriented business model, yet they must compete with public prisons in cost per day of each inmate. To keep the cost to the taxpayers competitive, private prisons cut costs in the following ways:

1. Hire fewer correctional officers. Critics of private prisons say that a private prison will have 20 percent fewer officers around at any given time. This calls into question whether correctional officers are working in a safe environment. Prisoners themselves are often in danger as well. Conditions for prisoners were so bad in the CCA prison that it earned the name “The Gladiator School.”
2. Operate in right-to-work states so management has no union of correctional officers to deal with.
3. Scrimp on training of correctional officers and pay less than publicly run prisons. Salaries are also kept low because of a high turnover among prison staff. Less seniority means lower overall payroll.
4. Hold the line on medical treatments for inmates.

Yet in spite of these “cost-saving” practices, an Arizona study found that holding a prisoner in a private prison can actually increase the state’s cost by well over \$1000 per year. This is because the private prison contractor cherry-picks the prisoners it will incarcerate. Private prison contractors prefer a population of people serving time for minor offenses who are more likely to quietly serve their time and can be warehoused. Private prisons screen out:

1. Chronically ill prisoners. A prisoner suffering from mental illness, HIV, diabetes, or any other chronic illness will not be held in a private prison. These prisoners cost too much.
2. Inmates that may pose a security risk. This includes the most violent of the state’s prison population. Those prisoners are not housed at private prisons.
3. Any prisoner thought to be an escape risk.
4. Any prisoner showing a propensity to read law books and file writs with the courts.

In June of 2011, the Lewiston Tribune reported that the CCA contract costs Idaho about \$50 a day for every inmate in its system, and that the state pays about \$52.22 a day tending to each of its prisoners. Even in a straight-across cost comparison, there is very little difference in cost per inmate. But the Arizona study suggests that after all the inmate screening, prison violence and lawsuits that go with privatization, this private prison contract has merely driven up Idaho’s costs by about 4 percent instead of reducing costs.

And finally, we simply cannot ignore the correlation between campaign donations to some Idaho legislators and to Governor Otter. Governor Otter collected \$19,000 in campaign contributions from CCA, and he has long been known as a supporter of prison privatization in general. We don’t know if those campaign contributions also contribute to the governor’s support of prison privatization, but we do know that the public perceives that connection to be true, and that in itself is a problem.