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Report: "We Can't Build Our Way Out Of Prison Overcrowding"

February 23, 2012

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - West Virginia's prison system is in crisis, but the authors of a new report say they can offer lawmakers a way out. The state's prisons are so overcrowded that the regional jails have all but run out of room for the overflow.

The Rev. James Patterson, CEO of the Partnership of African-American Churches, is one of the authors of the just-released report, "Stemming the Tide: The Racial and Economic Impacts of West Virginia's Prison System." He says the crime rate is not going up, but the state has made it almost impossible for non-violent offenders to pay their debt and stay out of trouble.

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"If the population isn't growing, and the crime rate isn't rising, yet the number of people going to prison is increasing, then that's a reason to be concerned."

Lawmakers are now debating Senate Bill 342. Instead of trying to increase the number of cells, the bill would provide for more substance abuse treatment and more supervision and support for ex-inmates.

Some at the legislature say they favor continuing the state's "get tough" posture by building a new prison estimated to cost more than \$200 million. Patterson says that doesn't make any sense, when almost all of the prisoners are there for a reason connected to substance abuse, which doesn't respond to a throw-away-the-key approach.

"We're going to spend ourselves into bankruptcy with this criminal justice system, if we aren't careful. This is an issue, a problem, that we can't build ourselves out of."

Patterson says he favors drug courts, which are much cheaper and have been proven to work. He adds that alternative sentences are also less expensive and more effective, because they help keep non-violent offenders off the streets and in

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"If we collect taxes from people because they're working, instead of paying \$24,000 a year to keep them incarcerated, that's a win-win for everybody."

The report, "Stemming the Tide: The Racial and Economic Impacts of West Virginia's Prison System," is available at the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy website, www.wvpolicy.org/.

Dan Heyman, Public News Service - WV

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