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Prison Overcrowding Problem Puts Burden on Taxpayers



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KANAWHA COUNTY, W. Va. (WSAZ) – Overcrowded prisons are considered problematic across the state, and are costing taxpayers their hard-earned cash.

"West Virginia increased by a larger percentage than any state in the Union its spending on corrections," said Reverend James Patterson of the Partnership of African American churches.

"If we're spending all this money on corrections, how will finance other important issues like education?" he said.

Patterson studied the issue along with representatives from two other organizations -- the West Virginia Center on Policy and Budget, and the American Friends Service Committee.

They reported their findings to legislators and suggested other ways to deal with nonviolent and low-risk offenders. Ways they say will better help the offenders get back on track and ease the taxpayer burden.

"There's alternative sentencing...more parole, mental health courts and drug courts," Patterson said. "There are many strategies that are being done in other states that could help eliminate this problem."

Joseph Lavigne is a former inmate who spent 15 years in the prison system, only to later have his case overturned. He says the conditions were unbelievable.

"You wake up every day living in fear," he said. "You go to sleep living in fear. Sometimes you

have six people in each room."

He believes the system would benefit from more programs to help violators re-intergrate into society.

"You keep people in prison at over \$25,000 apiece who don't need to be there anymore," he said. "That just costs the public."

Carl Chadband works at the Kanawha Institute of Social Research and Action (KISRA) and offers programs to help ex-offenders restart their lives -- and stay out of jail.

"We need to stop being hard on crime and start giving folks a second chance," he said.

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