

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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Where Can Wisconsin Find Extra Prison Beds?

Gov. Walker asked for 2086 contract prison beds in his biennial budget. This is far less than the 3686 beds the DOC asked for (a contract bed is a bed in a Wis. county jail that the DOC rents to house the overflow of prisoners the prison system can't hold). Even with expanded use of the Earned Release Program, there will still be a 1208 bed shortage.

I think I know how Gov. Walker can make up that shortfall: release 1200 prisoners serving time under the old law. We are being needlessly warehoused at the cost of tens of millions of dollars. The cost of housing us is only the tip of the iceberg. Imagine how much money the economy is losing at the same time. We could be out in the free world working and earning money, paying rent, buying cars and groceries, and paying our share of taxes.

When you keep people in prison for 30 years and deprive them of an opportunity to work, you create a lifelong burden on society. Letting a prisoner out in his sixties, after not having held a job for 30 years, leaves him barely able to support himself until he reaches retirement age. When he retires, he will not have worked long enough to qualify for social security, he won't have a pension and he will not have been able to put money into a 401k.

Guess who will be supporting him for the rest of his life? The American Public. He will be collecting SSI or SSD for decades. This is the first time our country will be facing this issue because we have never locked up so many people for so long. There will be millions of people living in poverty, struggling to survive on SSI. Not only has a prisoner been punished for decades beyond reason, he will spend the rest of his life faced with privation. The burden of their failing health and the costs associated with it will fall on the taxpayer.

I am amazed that our elected officials can't see the damage their policies are doing. For someone who claims to be tough on crime, Gov. Walker's policies have the opposite effect. Those young prisoners he is releasing early by the thousands are the ones who are most likely to commit more crimes. Not only that, young ex-cons are the ones most likely to escalate to more serious crimes. Who do you think is going to be committing the murders, rapes and armed robberies of tomorrow? The young man who is released early today.

I think Gov. Walker should take my advice and release 1200 old law prisoners to make room for the next wave of violent criminals.