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Career Issues From American Police Beat

Privatizing All Prisons

If you're a corrections officer or a deputy assigned to a jail in Arizona, you might want to start looking for a new job. Arizona is slated to become the first state to completely privatize its correctional system.

And we're not just talking county lock-ups like **Joe Arpaio's** world-famous tent city—even the super-max facilities housing the worst of the worst just might end up being staffed and run by for-profit companies like Corrections Corporation of America and Wackenhut.

Arizona spends \$4.7 million each year to house inmates who are serial killers, rapists, gang-bangers and every other bad guy and gal you can think of. To many state legislators the idea of privatizing corrections is too good to pass up. Who wouldn't want to save \$5 million bucks and turn the complicated process of administering death sentences to private companies?

The knock on private prisons for quite some time now is that lax security, and poorly trained and paid staffs have led to escapes and other problems. But with tax revenues falling and

unemployment rising, for profit prisons are a dream come true for entrepreneurial-minded public officials.

According to a report in the *Arizona Republic*, state officials will soon seek bids from private companies for nine of the state's ten prison complexes that house roughly 40,000 inmates, including 127 on death row. It is the first effort by a state to put its entire prison system under private control.

The privatization effort is the best indication yet of what some states and counties are willing to do to get out from under crushing deficits. Arizona officials hope the effort will put a \$100 million dent in the state's roughly \$2 billion budget shortfall.

"Let's not kid ourselves," said **State Representative Andy Biggs**, a Republican who supports private prisons. "If we were not in this economic environment, I don't think we'd be talking about this with the same sense of urgency."

Another unusual feature of the Arizona proposal is the way the contracts will be structured.

Generally speaking, private prison companies build facilities for a state, then charge them per prisoner to operate those jails. But under the Arizona legislation, a vendor would pay \$100 million up front to operate one or more prison complexes.

While executions would still be performed by the state, officials say the Department of Corrections hand over other day-to-day operations to the private operator and pay a per-day fee for each prisoner.

"I would not want to be the warden of death row," said **Todd Thomas**, the warden of a prison in Eloy, Arizona, run by the Corrections Corporation of America. The company, the country's largest private prison operator, has six prisons in Arizona with inmates from other states.

"That's not to say we couldn't," Mr. Thomas said. "But the liability is too great. I don't think any private entity would ever want to do that."

So if the state winds up frying the wrong guy, it will still be the taxpayers on the hook for any damages resulting from subsequent lawsuits.

Arizona is no stranger to private prisons. Nearly 30 percent of the state's prisoners are being held in prisons operated by private companies outside the state's 10 complexes. While these developments might be a little disconcerting for corrections officers in California, who are represented by the powerful California Correctional Peace Officers Association, the CEOs at CCA and Wackenhut are already getting the champagne ready.

The Arizona push to privatize corrections is giving new life into a movement that has been on the decline across the country as cost savings from prison privatizations have regularly failed to materialize, corrections officers unions have resisted the efforts, and high-profile problems in privately run facilities have drawn unwanted publicity.

"We have private prisons in Arizona already, and we are very happy with the performance and the savings we get from them,"

Representative John Kavanagh, a Republican who is chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and an architect of the new

legislation authorizing the privatization, told the *Arizona Republic*. "I think that they are the future of corrections in Arizona."

As tough sentencing laws and the ensuing increase in prisoners began to press on state resources in the 1980s, private prison companies pitched their services to states with promises of lower costs.

Critics are quick to point out the fact that there have been high-profile riots, escapes and other violent incidents. The companies also do not provide anywhere near the same wages and benefits as state-run facilities, which has resulted in resistance from unions and concerns that the private prisons attract less-qualified workers.

Then the federal government stepped in, with a surge of new immigrant prisoners, and began to contract with the private companies after the implementation of the 287(g) agreements. The number of federal prisoners in private prisons in the United States has more than doubled, to 32,712 in 2008 from 15,524 in 2000. The number of state prisoners in privately run prisons has increased to 93,500 from 75,000 during that period.

Whether or not the Arizona plan is brilliant or moronic depends on who you ask. Some say any measure that would keep dangerous offenders in prison longer is worth a shot because so many states are considering releasing prisoners before their sentences have been completed as a matter of financial necessity.

Some professional correctional officers, however, are questioning the wisdom of hiring an 18-year-old kid at \$10 bucks an hour to secure a facility holding serial killers, child predators, and more likely sooner than later—terrorists.

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Editor's Note: A little over 10 years ago, a serious attempt was made to privatize an entire region in Florida Corrections. PBA was able to stop that effort.

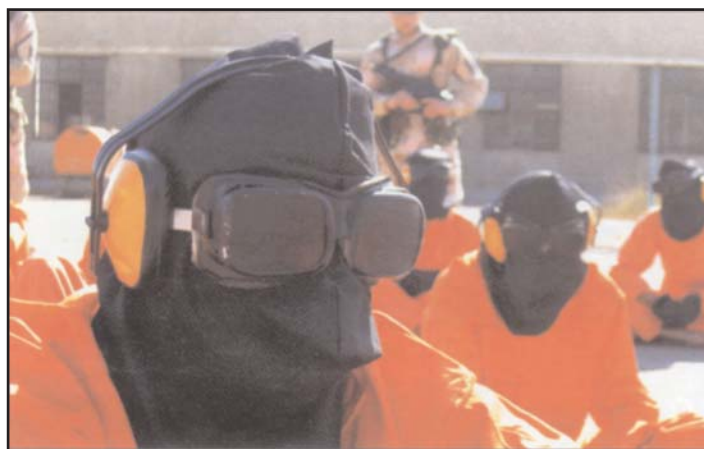
~David

Judge to prospective juror: "Is there any reason you could not serve as a juror on this case?"

Juror: "Yes, your honor. I don't want to be away from work that long."

Judge: "Can't they do without you at work?"

Juror: "Sure they can, but I don't want them to know that."



Hopefully suspected terrorists won't be guarded by 18-year-old kids with little or no training in corrections.