



Expand the Earned Release Program in Wisconsin State Budget

The Problem:

Wisconsin's prison population has experienced astronomical growth in recent years. Between 1980 and 2016, the state's prison population increased 456% to more than 22,000 people.ⁱ Many of those men and women have been sentenced into Wisconsin's Substance Abuse Program, better known as Earned Release. This is a six-month intensive, federally-approved program designed to reduce future criminal behavior by addressing criminal thinking and substance use disorders.

Currently, there are over 3,500 people on the waiting list for this program and only 750 beds. Expanding this program will give individuals necessary treatment and contribute to their positive reintegration back into society. The Earned Release Program offers cognitive-based substance abuse curricula which addresses social skills building, problem solving, family dynamics, anger management, and employability.

Between 2000 and 2016, the number of people who were admitted to Wisconsin prisons with drug convictionsⁱⁱ increased 18%, from 2,072 to 2,448. Over that same period, the number of people admitted to prison with an opioid offense increased nearly 13-fold, growing from 78 people (4% of all drug offenses) to 998 people (41% of all drug offenses). Overall, drug offenses made up 20% of new admissionsⁱⁱⁱ to Wisconsin prisons in 2018.^{iv}

According to a 2015 DOC report, Washington, Green Lake, Manitowoc, and Waupaca counties have the highest percentages of opioid abuse prison admissions; Green, Racine, Kewanee, Rock counties for cocaine admissions; and Taylor, Bayfield, Dunn and Douglas Counties for methamphetamine admissions.^v

Incarceration in response to conviction of a crime committed as a result of alcohol or drug addiction is only one of the many ways substance abuse negatively affects lives. A 2017 Department of Corrections report shows that 69% of admitted prisoners had a substance abuse need.^{vi} Couple this with rising usage of methamphetamine, fentanyl and other drugs, and we're facing the local fallout of a national epidemic.^{vii} Methamphetamine usage alone cost Wisconsin over \$424 million in 2015.^{viii}

The Solution:

Without treatment, substance abusers are extremely likely to continue fueling their addictions, regardless of convictions. This Earned Release Program has several criteria for enrollment. An individual must not be convicted of a violent offense; have an identified substance abuse treatment need; and be deemed eligible by the sentencing judge.

If the judge finds the person eligible and they successfully complete the 6-month alcohol and other drug abuse treatment program, their remaining incarceration time will be converted to extended supervision and they will be released.

Expanding the Earned Release Program will provide a release valve allowing those who successfully complete to return to their local support networks, continue extended supervision, receive specialized treatment to directly mitigate their addictions, and remove some financial and personnel burdens from our overcrowded prison system. Proposals to expand Earned Release Program will result in savings to taxpayers, reduce prison populations while cutting prison costs and make communities safer.

ⁱ BJS, Corrections Statistical Analysis Tool

ⁱⁱ Note: Some individuals admitted to prison have been convicted of multiple offenses. In this paragraph, offense breakdowns include anyone with any drug offense conviction and may not reflect the most serious offense for which that person may be serving time.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note: This does not include people revoked to prison (for technical violations or new crimes), people being held temporarily pending revocation, or individuals for whom offense data is not available. In fiscal year 2018, 11,750 people were admitted to Wisconsin prisons, including 4,184 people labeled “No Data/Unsentenced,” meaning they were either incarcerated pending revocation or the DOC did not have offense data for them. Additionally, 5,548 people were admitted to prison from community supervision, either for a technical violation or a new crime. This paragraph only includes the remaining 2,888 people who were not included in the revocation admissions or the “No Data/Unsentenced” population.

^{iv} Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Adult Corrections Program: Informational Paper 54 (January 2019). Note: Admissions data in this paragraph refers to fiscal year.

^v Wisconsin DOC Drug Offender Prison Admissions <https://doc.wi.gov/DataResearch/DataAndReports/DrugOffenderPrisonAdmissions2000to2016.pdf>

^{vi} Wisconsin DOC Drug Offender Prison Admissions <https://doc.wi.gov/DataResearch/DataAndReports/DrugOffenderPrisonAdmissions2000to2016.pdf>

^{vii} <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p01739c.pdf>

^{viii} Methamphetamine in Wisconsin, DHS <https://www.questdiagnostics.com/home/physicians/health-trends/drug-testing.html>