



PRESS RELEASE

MS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS *723 N. PRESIDENT ST. *JACKSON, MS 39202 *(601)359-5600 *(FAX: 5738)

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Contact: Jennifer Griffin
Phone: (601) 359-5721
Fax: (601) 359-5738

MDOC Commissioner Responds to Grassroots Leadership Report on Private Prisons in Mississippi

Jackson—Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) Commissioner Robert L. Johnson today said there is a place for private prisons in Mississippi, but it should be in terms of need not out of an obligation to private prison companies. Commissioner Johnson said correctional philosophy in Mississippi has led us to this juncture in terms of the amount of money spent on corrections.

“Mississippi decided that it was necessary to get tough on crime by making all convicted felons serve 85% of their sentence,” said Commissioner Johnson. “When this happened, Mississippi found it quickly needed to build more prison beds. This need for construction is what has driven up the corrections budget.”

Since the 1994 special session of the Legislature that passed truth in sentencing laws, Mississippi has constructed more than 6,200 prison beds. Of this number 3,400 are private prison beds. The majority of these beds, one-thousand at the Delta Correctional Facility in Greenwood, Miss. and one-thousand at the Marshall County Correctional Facility in Holly Springs, Miss., are for healthy, male inmates that pose only a minimal security threat.

“Correctional philosophy in Mississippi is now being dictated by the appropriations process,” said Commissioner Johnson. “This philosophy is supported by the need to protect the interests of private prison companies. We need to be looking at the niche, the type of services private prisons can provide better than the MDOC and that they should provide for the protection of public safety.”

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The MDOC presented a budget proposal for FY2003 that included the addition of 250 special needs beds for state inmates at the East Mississippi Correctional Facility in Meridian, Miss, which is operated by Wackenhut Corporation. This request was not considered by the Mississippi Legislature.

“We have a duty to provide special medical care and treatment for inmates suffering from mental illnesses and for the custody, care and treatment of youthful offenders convicted of felonies,” said Commissioner Johnson. “This is the type of service that private prisons can provide better than the MDOC.”

Commissioner Johnson said he was not philosophically opposed to private prisons, but believed Mississippi needs to look at whether the private prison corporations can provide a service better than the state can provide. If they can, then the state should utilize it.

“I don’t believe the state should continue to build prisons and pay for beds that we already have a surplus of just because a private prison company came to Mississippi to make a profit,” said Commissioner Johnson.

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