

PRESS RELEASE



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JOINT STATEMENT ON THE PROPOSED CALICO ROCK PRISON EXPANSION

From DecARcerate, Inc. and Arkansas Justice Reform Coalition

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On Thursday, Feb 10th, Governor Hutchinson announced support of an expansion of 498 beds to the Calico Rock North Central unit as a response to the backup of state sentenced Arkansans being housed in county jails across the state. The project is slated to cost between \$60 and \$100 million and is made possible by the state's billion-dollar surplus pending approval from the legislature.

The stated need for additional bed space has been attributed in part to the backlog in county jails. This proposal comes on the heels of courts reopening after COVID closure which drove the number of people sentenced up quickly and escalated those awaiting transfer. To add to that, each outbreak of COVID at state units causes a stop to the movement of sentenced individuals out of the county jails. This knee-jerk reaction to a point in time concern is disproportional. Policy changes have not been attempted and could easily remedy any overcrowding concerns. This would leave these beds sitting empty in the near future.

Arkansas Board of Corrections Chairman Benny Magness [said on Tuesday](#) that a driver of the high cost was the ADC's desire to create more "two-man" or "single man" cells rather than "barrack style" housing.

Humane treatment of individuals at our state prisons is an important human rights issue that has far-reaching effects on Arkansas families and communities. These cells would amount to solitary confinement, a practice that inflicts immense suffering. Isolation causes individuals to deteriorate mentally, physically, and socially. Solitary confinement has been recognized as a form of torture by the United Nations and can cause psychosis, anxiety, depression, and heart disease, and too often leads to self-mutilation and death by suicide and other causes.

[The Department of Corrections 2021-2022 Strategic Plan](#) lists "Decrease Restrictive Housing and Isolation Population" as a key objective. This expansion is in direct conflict with the ADC's stated objective to reduce the use and scope of solitary confinement. The latest [CLA-Liman survey](#), which captured data for one day in October 2019, showed that 11.0% of people incarcerated in Arkansas prisons were held in solitary confinement. The national median was 3.8%. No other participating prison system reported a figure in the double digits. This was a 23.6% increase from the previous survey in 2017 when the ADC reported that 8.9% of the Arkansas population was in solitary. These cells would continue to add to these deplorable numbers.

Despite many in law enforcement across the state saying we can't jail or arrest our way out of community concerns like homelessness, mental health needs, recovery needs, and poverty – that is exactly what happens every day in county jails across the state. Do we have an overcrowding problem? Being the [fourth highest incarcerator](#) per capita in the nation, Arkansans are not more criminal than 46 other states.

Arkansas' punitive approach ignores data-backed solutions that have created better community safety and well-being in other areas of the country. Investments in these areas will be more cost-effective than continually building more jail and prison beds. When we no longer hold those too poor to buy their freedom, address the failure to appear in a different manner, and provide robust pretrial services we will see empty jail beds. If simple policy changes are all that is needed to reduce the population in the jails, why don't we do these things now? It is as though some are hopeful that their lasting legacy will be the building of more bars and cages.

State budgets are moral documents, indicating what a society values. Rather than propping up systems of incarceration and state control, Arkansas can and should redirect this money toward efforts that build and foster the community. The estimated \$60-\$100 could provide:

- Affordable housing
- Redirect public funds to community organizations that provide social services and place social workers in our jails
- Pretrial services divisions in each county, funded sufficiently to ensure that there are sufficient case managers to properly interview defendants when they enter jail and make recommendations for the least restrictive release conditions, connect individuals to needed services and stay in contact with them throughout their case
- Pre-K expansion
- Provide better medical care to detained individuals
- Properly fund our current Crisis Stabilization Units and expand those
- Create more community based mental health facilities to provide for all levels of crisis care
- Provide grants to and funding for drug and alcohol addiction treatment
- Provide tuition-free community college
- Properly fund and oversee more public defenders and ensure they have reasonable caseloads that do not exceed the recommendations of the American Bar Association
- Offer job training and other educational opportunities to incarcerated individuals
- Develop statewide data-driven metrics

The state has a long history of severe staff shortages in all its facilities and local county sheriffs have had to resort to using American Rescue Plan Act dollars to hire and maintain employees. Having fewer guards means significantly more dangerous conditions for everyone. The pandemic has only exacerbated these issues.

As the state moves to authorize a \$60-\$100 million prison expansion, we must consider the true cost of imprisonment. This includes both the monetary costs and the indirect and often detrimental impacts of imprisonment on individuals, families, and communities. When contemplating the Governor's proposed expansion, we must conclude that the cost, in more ways than one, outweighs any and all benefit.