HARRISONBURG - The planned elimination of $1 million in state funding from the Gemeinschaft Home - two-thirds of its budget - may garner short-term savings, but overlooks the long-term benefits of maintaining the halfway home, said Sen. Emmett Hanger, R-Mount Solon.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine announced the cuts last week as part of a broader statewide reduction plan. On Thursday, Hanger said he'll take his case for maintaining state funding for Gemeinschaft directly to the governor's office.

The Harrisonburg program, which has its halfway home on Mount Clinton Pike, accepts nonviolent drug offenders as they make the transition back to the community after prison.

Cost Savings

Gary Bass, the Virginia Department of Corrections' offender management services chief of operations, said community transition programs for inmates such as the one at Gemeinschaft "were never a cost savings."

Bass said the daily per diem for Gemeinschaft is in the upper-$60-per-day range. The DOC's average is in the lower $60s.

Many of the inmates come from lower-level institutions, which have even lower costs, Bass said.

"We will save money closing them," he said in the e-mail.

Bass' response was to an inquiry from Sen. Mark Obenshain, R-Harrisonburg, last week on whether the state program at Gemeinschaft was saving Virginia taxpayers money.

Long-Term Savings

But Gemeinschaft Executive Director Jennie Amison said last week the state saves money by having inmates participate in the community-transition program instead of remaining in prison.

Hanger agrees with Amison.

As the number of inmates in Virginia prisons grows, Hanger argues that programs such as the one at Gemeinschaft have the potential to save the state money. Currently, Gemeinschaft has 60 residents.

Prisoners who are in drug-treatment programs while incarcerated have a greater propensity to return to jail than those who participate in a similar program in a setting like Gemeinschaft, he said.

Programs that can lead inmates to become productive citizens is cheaper than reincarcerating them, Hanger said.

"It is not even close," he said.

Aside from the cost savings, Hanger said successfully treating substance abuse has the added benefit of keeping families together.

"Clearly, we want to punish dealers," he said.

Most of the people who fail prey to substance abuse must be treated appropriately if they are to maintain relatively normal lives, Hanger said.

"I am very strongly opposed to curtailing the program at Gemeinschaft," he said.

State Budget Cuts

The cut was part of a broader effort last week Kaine announced to reduce spending because of projections that revenues will not match budgeted expenses.

The official revenue reforecast released last week projects a shortfall of $973.6 million for fiscal 2009 and $1.54 billion for 2010, or just more than $2.5 billion for the biennium, Kaine reported.

Kaine plans to balance the fiscal-2009 budget through state agency savings and spending reductions of more than $348 million, as well as through additional steps, such as withdrawing about $400 million from the Revenue Stabilization Fund, commonly referred to as the "rainy-day fund."

Uncertain Future

The $1 million reduction in Gemeinschaft's overall $1.5 million budget has placed the nonviolent program's future in jeopardy.

Last week, Gemeinschaft Board President J.D. Glick said that the hit to the budget would force the home to reinvent itself and cut its 38-member staff.

The elimination of the state funding takes effect in mid-December.

To sustain Gemeinschaft, board members plan to seek help from Obenshain and other lawmakers and state officials in Richmond.

Gemeinschaft officials also plan to seek federal funds to replace the lost state money. The board plans to meet later this month and host a community meeting to discuss the issue Nov. 5.

Contact Jeff Mellott at 574-6290 or jmellott@dnronline.com

9 Comments(s) for Article

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skills and education to be able to survive without repeating the crimes that put them in the situations they are in to begin with. Something maybe like the VIEW program that the Department of Social Services has for mothers who need help. I personally know of a felon who just borrowed someone's vehicle and the stuff was in it. She got convicted on the 9/10ths of the law possession. She is having a hard time finding employment because there is no programs in place for locals. Think about it, this could happen to others. Some people do deserve a second chance and do change. Some just need help restarting their life that has been torn apart.

8. RE: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish?  
October 17, 2008 1:54 PM

#5-Thanks but those of us in the rural areas don't want this program either:) But that is the real problem-no one wants this in their backyard but these folks have to go somewhere. Maybe the state should look at more small scale operations in the local community that focus on those from that community rather than a central location that attracts people in from other areas. And with the state facing so many budget shortfalls currently, programs have to be trimmed. It is just a matter of what services draw the most public support and this is an item that won't likely get much support. But then that just begs the question of how do we deal with those that will be released from the system. It's a no win situation with no good easy answers. Do you cut this program or do you cut services to say elder care or child care? What has the biggest impact and what does the most good? I guess that depends on if you ask a crime victim, the spouse of an older citizen with dementia who has no support to help with the day to day task of providing care, or the parent of a young child who finally got a good job but can't take it because they can't afford to pay for the day care they need. As a state, we just don't have the funds to serve all the needs and we probably won't for a few years to come. To me that is the really sad take-away from the article.

hate2work  
Luray

7. RE: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish?  
October 17, 2008 12:43 PM

If, #6, there are people here who are not getting the help then, why doesn't this program focus on helping them instead of bringing people from other parts of the state?

M.806

6. RE: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish?  
October 17, 2008 12:28 PM

There are plenty of drug offenders in the valley who are not getting help, while these gentlemen are. So, to say those who are relocated here are becoming a burden and a drain on the valley is a stretch. I have seen this program work with a pretty good success rate over the past 10 years. Many of these men are thriving in the valley, where as if they were returned back to their original environments, they would certainly return to old habits and end up back in the corrections system costing the state much more money in the long run. One million dollars does sound like a large savings but when your are talking about trying cut $348 million, I don't think you start with an effective and relatively small program first.

jackson540  
harrisonburg

5. RE: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish?  
October 17, 2008 9:56 AM

The program is great. It should continue. The location is bad. It's too close to schools/universities and residential neighborhoods. The location should be moved to a more rural setting.

frustrated  
Harrisonburg

4. RE: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish?  
October 17, 2008 9:29 AM

Sen. Obenshain,  
Do not allow this program to continue. Too many offenders from all over the state are relocating in the valley!  
Not a service to the citizens, businesses, taxpayers, or law enforcement. The displaced drug users are a burden on our local area!

knowsbest  
valley

3. RE: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish?  
October 17, 2008 9:10 AM

I have heard several claims that Gemeinschaft has a very high rate of residents not ending up in jail again in the future, thereby clearly saving the state money. I hope the state comes through with some help. I'm so glad people in influential positions are taking up this issue. Good to see the article.

Anonymous1

2. RE: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish?  
October 17, 2008 6:59 AM

Let's hope that the reinvention includes serving the local offenders from our community rather than importing criminals from all over the state.

M.806

1. RE: Penny Wise, Pound Foolish?  
October 17, 2008 6:50 AM

I can finally said that Sen. Obenshain and I are in total agreement on this one..... I am glad to see that