

INMATE CENTER, BIDDER DRAW FIRE

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A proposal to build a community justice center for 500 male inmates in Hartford has sparked controversy over a bidder's lobbying and whether a 24-hour locked-down facility is the best way to treat nonviolent offenders.

The Department of Correction has requested proposals to build a treatment and job training facility in Hartford for nonviolent male offenders who are preparing for their release or who have violated probation. The only bidder the public has so far learned about -- Education and Health Centers of America, a nonprofit arm of Community Corrections Corp. -- recently lost a contract to open a similar treatment center for women in Niantic, because of aggressive lobbying.

The company -- which has proposed building the Hartford center in the heavily commercial North Meadows neighborhood -- has courted Hartford residents and activists with a meeting at a local restaurant and a tour of its facility in New Jersey.

The short-term residential program would provide substance abuse education and treatment, and vocational and life-skills training, according to the state's request for proposals. It would help break the release, relapse, return-to-prison cycle, prison officials say.

"We're developing a strategy that involves the community," said Correction Commissioner Theresa Lantz. "We're trying to provide inmates with support, not just opening the doors and throwing them out. So they can move from incarceration and dependency to being able to function on their own."

But some residents, union officials and advocates for halfway houses have reservations about having in the city a facility with the feel of a prison.

"A 500-bed facility is not a community justice center. It's more like a prison," said Nora Duncan, program services coordinator for Connecticut Association of Nonprofits. "Community work happens at the community level, and it's very difficult to do when there's 500 inmates involved. Smaller programs spread throughout the community, like halfway houses, are more appropriate and would better assist the inmates in returning back to their actual communities."

The proposal is also getting caught up in a controversy over a similar center planned for female inmates in an existing building at the York Correctional Institution in Niantic. When it opens, the center will be the first of its kind in Connecticut.

Last month, at the request of Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, prison officials canceled the contract awarded to Community Corrections for the Niantic center.

The Niantic contract was canceled because of fears of inappropriate lobbying procedures. Before winning the contract, the company hired the lobbying firm of Gaffney, Bennett & Associates, which is headed by Jay Malcynsky, a close adviser to former Gov. John G. Rowland, for \$75,000 a year.

Community Corrections then flew influential lawmakers and state officials in a private plane to its community justice center in Roseland, N.J. State officials did not visit facilities operated by any of the other out-of-state bidders. The company's president, John Clancy, also donated \$2,000 to Rowland's 2002 re-election campaign.

Bids for the Hartford community justice center, which a bill passed by the legislature in May requires to be built in Hartford with at least 500 beds, are still being reviewed. Correction officials would not discuss any company's proposal

until the contract is awarded.

But during a meeting at the Rajun Cajun restaurant in April, Clancy said the company hoped to build the 500-bed facility in the North Meadows, said the Rev. Cornell Lewis, one of several Hartford activists who attended.

Lewis said he was invited by the meeting's host, state Rep. Marie Lopez Kirkley-Bey, D-Hartford. She said she has been invited to tour Community Corrections' New Jersey center and is planning to go in the near future. The company would provide transportation, she said.

At the end of July, Gov. M. Jodi Rell issued an edict barring state employees from traveling with contractors or lobbyists to evaluate possible state projects. Since legislators are not under the jurisdiction of the governor, the edict applies only to state employees in the executive branch, said Dennis Schain, a spokesman for the governor.

Lewis, who visited the facility with two other Hartford residents a few days after the April meeting, said he was given a tour by Clancy and the company's clinical staff. He drove to New Jersey in his own car.

Lewis said the facility was well lit, spacious, and pleasant-looking, although it did have a barbed wire topped fence surrounding it. He said the program has strong clinical and educational components, including computers and a library.

"I was impressed. It was nothing like a prison," Lewis said. "The atmosphere was completely different. It was a learning, educational center. The men were not afraid like in a prison. This facility has all the things people say we need to have to put inmates back into society. It's a missing link between making it and not making it. I give it my approval."

The building of large treatment centers for nonviolent inmates was first proposed and spearheaded by then Correction Commissioner John J. Armstrong in 2001 as a means to address prison overcrowding. The plan called for a 500-bed center and was based on the New Jersey facility.

The Niantic contract controversy now appears to be affecting Community Corrections' proposal in Hartford.

"The whole thing seems to be a sweetheart deal," said Gene Tewksbury, president of the Connecticut Correctional Employees Union, AFSCME local branch 1565. "It seems to me it would be cheaper for the state to do this by itself, in-house. In fact, these are jobs we already do now. Some legislators bought into the goods they were sold. They were promised job training and substance abuse treatment, but you just can't provide both in one facility."

Tewksbury said the size of the facility was also of concern to his union. He said halfway houses already provide transition into the community for inmates.

"The smaller the halfway house, the better," he said, "because the staff is going to be more interactive. If you have 25 inmates, you know them very well and can provide the needed services. But if you have a hundred or more, you're just pushing numbers around ... In a huge facility, there is no rehabilitation."

Ron Cretaro, executive director of Connecticut Association of Nonprofits, a group of 530 organizations, many of which run halfway houses in the state, agreed.

"The idea is to support community alternatives to prison. But a community justice center represents the continuation of institutionalization," Cretaro said. He added that several CAN nonprofits submitted bids for the community justice center.

A Vine Street resident, Hattie Harris, advocates for more programs to prevent criminal behavior, rather than a treatment facility for criminal offenders.

"What they need to build is a place where they can reach out to young people, to teach them that it's not all about killing and stabbing," she said. "We have so many young people with so much anger in them, and nobody's doing anything."

Community Corrections spokesman William Palatucci says the company did not do anything wrong in giving tours of its facility or in lobbying for its proposals. Company officials testified at public hearings and briefed legislators when the state was researching treatment alternatives for inmates, he said.

"We simply wanted to explain what our experience across the country was and how to reduce recidivism and provide treatment," Palatucci said. He said the company checked with the State Ethics Commission on how to conduct tours for state employees and policy makers. "Our feeling is that we were not lobbying for any particular contract."

Records show nearly 2,000 inmates are eligible to be reviewed for release to community-based programs. Lack of housing is one reason they remain in jail cells. As of July, 18,582 people were incarcerated in the state, at a cost of more than \$500 million per year to taxpayers.

An estimate of the cost of the center in Hartford has not been released, but officials said part of \$50 million in correction bonding money could be used for acquisition of land and other expenses.

Leaders of community organizations such as Hartford's Create Change said funding for a community justice center would be better spent on community programs.

"This center will just be giving the Department of Correction more beds to put prisoners in," said Lorenzo Jones, an organizer with Create Change. "Right now, in order to get help, you have to go to prison, so that eventually you can end up in a community justice center. It would be nice if these men could get the services they need before they go to jail."

Prison officials said the proposed community justice center is only one element of a larger strategy to ease prison overcrowding. The bill passed in May increases funding for new parole and probation officers to supervise inmates after they have been released, as well as for 310 new halfway house beds. The legislation also makes technical changes that speed up the parole process and give judges the right to order substance abuse treatment instead of jail, officials said.

But reassurances from the correction department have not changed the advocates' mind about the proposal in Hartford.

"There isn't a whole lot of history that could tell us how it works," Duncan said. "If you have other good programs, maybe this one doesn't need to be so large? This idea got pushed through all at once. New programs should be gradually stepped into."

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Correction: Correction published August 11, 2004. As of July, 18,582 people were incarcerated in Connecticut's prisons. A story on Page 1 in some editions Tuesday incorrectly stated that 582 people were in prison in the state as of July 18.

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