

National Opinion: Independent oversight of AZ prisons arrives right on time February 8, 2023

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Gov. Katie Hobbs just issued an executive order creating the Independent Prison Oversight Commission. The commission is the first of its kind in Arizona, and its work can't get started fast enough.

While managing prisons is difficult even on the best day, in the best circumstances, Arizona's system has been mired in controversy, scandal, and struggle for more than a decade.

For the safety and well-being of incarcerated people and the correctional officers who walk the prison hallways every day, Arizona's prison system desperately needs the accountability and transparency that only independent oversight can generate.

Like many states' prison systems, the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry (ADCRR) suffers from chronic understaffing. This has created living and working conditions that staff warn put prisons on the "brink of collapse."

The cost of the system's failures are not being borne solely by people who live and work in the state's prisons. Taxpayers are on the hook. The ADCRR just lost a years-long lawsuit that cost the state millions in legal fees and fines because prison health care is so "plainly grossly inadequate" it violates the Constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

Broken locks, escapes, forced inductions of labor in pregnant incarcerated women, crumbling infrastructure — these problems and more have contributed to low morale among staff and reduced trust in the ADCRR among both incarcerated people and correctional officers. Independent oversight is overdue, and Gov. Hobbs is right to prioritize it.

For the last several years, the state Legislature considered but failed to pass a bill to create a permanent independent oversight body. We hope the Legislature will act, but the crisis in Arizona's prisons cannot wait.

Implementing independent oversight can bring much-needed transparency and help identify and expose the dangers and challenges that officers and incarcerated people face on a daily basis. Our leaders need unbiased information to improve working conditions for our officers and to reduce recidivism for people leaving prison.

The governor's proposed Independent Prison Oversight Commission will be composed of lawmakers from both parties, people impacted directly by incarceration, advocates for people in prison, and medical and mental health professionals. It will have the power to inspect prisons and is required to issue its first report on its findings in November.

Inspections — especially unannounced ones — are the backbone of meaningful prison oversight. It is too easy for corrections officials to hide or minimize problems if an inspection is announced too far in advance. The commission must be able to see prisons as they actually operate. We can't fix problems if we don't even know what they are.

The establishment of this new oversight commission should be a great help to new ADCRR director, Dr. Ryan Thornell. Dr. Thornell was praised for his open mind and forward thinking as a deputy director of Maine's prison system.

We hope he will be committed to transparency and treat the oversight commission as a helpful, trustworthy partner in diagnosing ills and recommending remedies.

ADCRR staff should also welcome this oversight commission. For years, staff concerns about safety, overcrowding, and understaffing have fallen on deaf ears.

The commission's members include a person with a background in corrections or a representative from an organization that represents Arizona correctional officers. Their seat at the table will help inform the commission about the realities of working life in prisons, which policies work and which don't, and what the real obstacles are to change.

Incarcerated people and their families will also benefit from oversight. Too often, concerns for a loved one's health, safety, and rehabilitation are ignored, or the inmate grievance process breaks down. The commission's work can shed light on which failures are systemic and which policies need overhaul or more consistent implementation.

Taxpayers pay \$1.3 billion each year for Arizona's prison system. They deserve to know whether it is keeping the public, staff, and incarcerated people — our future neighbors — safe. Prison safety is public safety. Gov. Hobbs's new commission is proof that she takes this truth seriously.