

**From:** Lee Watson (DOC) <[Lee.Watson@doc.arkansas.gov](mailto:Lee.Watson@doc.arkansas.gov)>

**Sent:** Monday, July 21, 2025 10:01 PM

**To:**

[REDACTED]

**Cc:**

[REDACTED]

**Subject:** Capacity needs of the Arkansas Department of Corrections

Dear Legislators:

These comments and observations are my own thoughts and opinion. I speak only for myself and not the entire Board of Corrections (Board).

**Arkansas absolutely needs a new prison.** I don't mean for anything I say below to distract from that. Arkansas' incarceration of offenders has outpaced our facilities' capacity to house offenders for more than 45 years.

It's the Board's constitutional duty to oversee the management of and resources of the Department of Corrections—limited by the budget provided it by the governor and legislature. The Board is acutely aware of the need for a new facility, however:

- The Board has never requested a 3,000 bed facility,
- The Board has never been told that a 3,000 bed facility is needed.
- The Board has never been provided evidence that a 3,000 be facility is needed.
- The Board has not come to a conclusion that a 3,000 bed facility is needed.
- Our needs don't support a 3,000 bed facility when the county jail backup is 1,600. It goes without saying that tomorrow's needs will be greater than today's.

- The Board has voted to move forward with efforts to build a new prison, but with the realization that many factors would influence the outcome especially the willingness of the legislature to provide funding.

The sad fact is that the 3,000 number was pulled out of the Arizona hot air by our former Secretary of Corrections. Then it became a political promise founded on the same hot air. Despite correcting an employment problem, the Board didn't correct some of his actions one of which appears to have been to convince many of you that a 3,000 bed prison facility is needed in Arkansas. After that this took on a life of its own and it became about money.

It is important to note that the county jail backup (i.e. prison overcrowding) in recent years has remained somewhat consistently around 1,600. **If Arkansas had an additional 3,000 bed facility today, 1,400 beds would be empty.**

At the beginning of 2023, the legislature had previously approved and authorized \$75M to expand the North Central Unit (800 beds) by 500 beds. Due to increased construction costs from the time of that approval, approximately \$50M or so additional funds were needed for that project. The planning and preparation was complete (architectural and engineering services) and all that was needed was to secure the additional funding to begin construction. Had that happened, the 500 bed expansion would likely be completed today and our county jail backup would be down to 1,100. However, our former Secretary stopped those efforts in their tracks in early 2023.

Arkansas' absolutely needs an additional prison in western or northwestern Arkansas with a capacity to house 1,000 inmates. It needs to be an intake facility so that sheriffs in western Arkansas can reduce expenses in transporting prisoners.

Just as important, Arkansas needs several (3 to 5) 100 to 200 bed community corrections facilities for non-violent offenders and parole violators can be treated for their substance abuse and build their support community to give them the ability to stay out of prison. We need one in Fort Smith, two in Northwest Arkansas, and possibly more. Their beds would also alleviate the county jail backup. They are less expensive than building prisons and provide community-based efforts for inmates to successfully function in their home communities.

If you wonder why the Board hasn't spoken up about this, keep in mind that the Board was designed to be a non-political body. The push for a facility with 3,000 beds is a political one. The Board shouldn't be involved in and avoids politics. Yet on this matter it was drug into the political fray. I can safely say that none of the Board members want to slow the construction of a new facility.

Arkansas' Department of Corrections and its county jails have needed relief for years. This can most quickly and cost efficiently happen by adding 500 beds to the North Central Unit, adding 500 beds through community corrections facilities, and by adding a 1,000 bed prison. Arkansas has a 500 million-dollar problem and a 1 billion-dollar 3,000 bed prison is not the solution.

I speak only for myself and not my fellow Board members. We need your support and we need funding to address our overcrowding problems. We need to find a prudent path forward that will address the needs of Arkansas.

Sincerely,  
Lee Watson,  
Board Member  
Arkansas Board of Corrections