



**American Friends
Service Committee**

Arizonans Oppose Building New Supermax Prison Beds

April 3, 2013

Dear Governor Brewer,

We write on behalf of all Arizonans who oppose the state's plans to build 500 additional maximum-security prison beds, using \$50 million from mortgage settlement funds. We are convinced that this is the wrong direction for Arizona.

Arizona's prison population is not growing. In fact, it decreased last year and the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) projects zero growth in the adult prison population for the next three years. We urge you to immediately halt plans to construct a 500-bed maximum-security facility in Buckeye.

Supermax confinement is a waste of taxpayer money, jeopardizes public safety, and is fundamentally inhumane. There is no evidence that solitary confinement reduces violence in prisons. In fact, opening the supermax facility in Arizona had no effect on prisoner-on-prisoner violence and actually **increased** prisoner on staff violence. Yet, at least 2,000 prisoners are held in isolation in Arizona every year at a minimum cost of \$50,000 per inmate – more than twice the cost of the average prisoner. Thirty-five percent of those held in supermax were convicted of non-violent crimes, and close to 40 percent have diagnosed mental health issues; some of whom are designated as seriously mentally ill.

The vast majority of prisoners in solitary confinement are eventually released back into the community. It is imperative that we invest our limited public dollars in proven alternatives that lead to greater rehabilitation and pave the way for successful reentry and reintegration.

Maximum-security prisons in Arizona have a horrible track record. The conditions are so abysmal that the ADC is currently facing a class-action lawsuit for its gross failure to provide necessary medical and mental health care for prisoners in these facilities. Meanwhile, rates of mental illness are much higher in these facilities than in other ADC facilities. Rates of suicide have skyrocketed, as have assaults and homicides. Maximum-security prisons do not make Arizonans more secure—they make us less secure.

States across the country are re-thinking the use of solitary confinement. Maine's corrections commissioner Joseph Ponte cut the supermax population in the Maine State Prison by more than half. Mississippi reduced its supermax prison population by almost 90 percent, reassigning those prisoners to mental health units or the general prison population. On June 19, 2012, Illinois Governor Pat Quinn announced the closing of the Tamms Correctional Center, the state's 500-bed supermax facility. Closing Tamms will save taxpayers \$21.6 million in the next year, and \$26.6 million every year after. Instead of sending more and more people to prison, judges in Texas are increasingly sentencing them to alternative treatment and rehabilitation programs—proven both more effective and less expensive.

Arizona is the only state currently considering building more supermax prison beds. Like these and many other states across the country, Arizona's budget reflects severe cuts to essential services and agencies across the board. Meanwhile, over 11 percent of the state's general budget is spent on corrections. Instead of building unnecessary and costly maximum-security beds, Arizona should be looking at alternatives that have been shown to be more cost-effective and humane. We should be

investing in communities through foreclosure prevention, consumer protection and reinvestment in social services and other programs.

The plan to build 500 new maximum-security prison cells is wrong for Arizona. It is unacceptable to raid \$50 million dollars from a fund for victims of the housing crisis to pay for prisons that are unnecessary and harmful to the people working and living inside them, and do nothing to make Arizonans safer. And it is irresponsible to appropriate \$4.5 million more for the operation of these unneeded prison facilities. ARIZONA IS MAXED OUT – we must change the course of corrections in this state!

We appreciate your consideration and would be pleased to provide further information.

Sincerely,

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