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Washington State Lawmakers Pass Ban on For-Profit Prisons

OLYMPIA — Washington lawmakers elected to prohibit the transfer of inmates to out-of-state private prisons, except for specific reasons, after the Senate voted 30 to 18 in favor of Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6442. Senator Rebecca Saldaña, D-Seattle, prime sponsor of the bill said it is intended to help end the growth of an industry in which private entities profit from prolific incarceration. The language of the original bill prohibited privately owned detention facilities from being contracted by local, state, or federal government entities and likely would have had an impact on the ICE detention facility in Tacoma. A last-second amendment was proposed by Saldaña to substantially narrow the focus of the legislation. Hannah Woerner, an attorney with Columbia Legal Services, testified to the Senate Human Services, Reentry & Rehabilitation Committee in favor of the original bill. Woerner claimed privately-run prisons are more violent and less sanitary than public facilities, in part because they cut down on guards and medical staff in order to maximize profits. They are also more prone to deliver delayed medical care to inmates in need. "Private prisons... have been shown to lead to increased recidivism," Saldaña said. "The detention and confinement of individuals carries great responsibility, and these functions must not be motivated by private profits." The companion bill to this legislation, House Bill 2576, passed 60 to 38 on Monday. Bill 2576 directs the Department of Health to evaluate state and local practices for inspecting private detention facilities and enforcing policies on the health, safety, and welfare of detainees. The results of the study could urge lawmakers toward the prohibition of private detention facilities in the future. "There is an inherent injustice in making money from those who are incarcerated," said Rep. Lillian Ortiz-Self, D-Mukilteo, prime sponsor of the companion bill in the House. "It is a violation of human rights and is contrary to our democratic values."