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New Mexico shrinks reliance on for-profit prison operators

New Mexico is on the cusp of finalizing prison takeovers that will reduce private prison operations to 25 percent of inmate beds, amid a plunge in prison population numbers statewide. Corrections Secretary Alisha Tafoya Lucero briefed a panel of state lawmakers Wednesday on negotiations by her agency to take over day-to-day prison operations from CoreCivic at the 744-bed Northwest New Mexico Correctional Center in Grants, and from GEO Group at the 590-bed Guadalupe County Correctional Facility at Santa Rosa in Southern New Mexico. In November 2019, New Mexico took over a prison in Clayton at a facility previously run by GEO Group. "Once we complete the takeover of these next two institutions, we will have reduced New Mexico's private prison dependency to less than 25 percent," Tafoya Lucero said. Private operators oversaw nearly 50 percent of available prison beds in early 2019. She said the state takeovers at Grants and Santa Rosa are scheduled for completion in November, and they will result in increased entry-level salaries for corrections officers of just over \$20 an hour, up from as low as \$15.50 at private facilities. Lease agreements will likely leave private operators in control of facility ownership and maintenance. The administration of Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham has rebuffed calls by state legislators for an immediate exit from the for-profit prison industry, aiming instead to negotiate a gradual withdrawal and avoid potentially costly disruptions. Democratic state Sen. Linda Lopez of Albuquerque applauded the shift away from for-profit prison operations. "It's so encouraging to hear about the state, what I call, reclaiming our facilities," she said. "This gives hope." In January, President Joe Biden ordered the Department of Justice to wind down its reliance on privately run prisons, directing the attorney general not to renew contracts. At the same time, New Mexico's prison population has undergone a precipitous decline in numbers since the outset of the coronavirus pandemic that leaves more than one-fourth of available beds empty, amid precautions against the spread of the virus at lockups and in the court system, state corrections officials said at the a wide ranging hearing on prison initiatives. More than 550 prisoners have been released since April 2020 under an executive order from the governor to commute sentences for prisoners who are eligible for early release, with the exception of several serious crimes. Tafoya Lucero said the state prison population has declined overall to 5,617, from 6,567 at the outset of the pandemic in March 2020. The population exceeded 7,300 as recently as 2017. At Santa Rosa, half the prison building is closed for lack of inmates and staff. The state has said it can do without at least one prison at Springer, as economic development officials explore alternative plans at the site to support local employment. But Tafoya Lucero cautioned against further prison closures because the state could see a surge in new inmates as courts resume criminal proceedings that were delayed by the pandemic. She highlighted the state's obligation to provide adequate prison cell space for each inmate under a legal settlement in early 2020. "What will happen when we do start to see additional prosecutions take place - does that mean that we have more people?" Tafoya Lucero said. "Ultimately it is very important that we made sure there is enough space for everybody who is incarcerated."