Prisons seek chaplains after state budget cuts

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In the weeks since North Carolina's legislature laid off most of its prison chaplains, Betty Brown, director of prison chaplaincy services, has been crisscrossing the state searching for volunteers who can attend to the religious needs of Native American, Wiccan and Rastafarian prisoners.

State legislators had assumed that volunteer ministries would jump in and help prisoners meet the ritual and devotional needs of their faiths. But so far that hasn't happened.

"It's been tough locating volunteers for those faith groups," said Brown, whose department lost 26 full-time prison chaplains as part of an effort to close a $2.6 billion state budget gap.

Across the nation, religious life behind bars is changing as correctional departments face budget cuts along with other state agencies. Some states, like North Carolina, have seen outright cuts. In other states, hiring freezes mean vacancies instead of replacements for chaplains who die or retire.

Gary Friedman, spokesman for the American Correctional Chaplains Association, said his organization distributes brochures to explain to legislators who are mulling over cuts the benefits of retaining correctional chaplains.

"Chaplains are getting caught up in all these budget reductions and staff reductions," he said. "It's going on all over the country." Some states, such as Texas, were able to spare chaplains in the budget negotiations. But in other states, prison chaplains are seeing increasing workloads in tough economic times, even as the religious diversity of inmates continues to grow.

In California, where about 130 prison chaplains are currently employed, there are three dozen vacancies.

At the California Men's Colony, a medium- and minimum-security prison in San Luis Obispo, Rabbi Lon Moskowitz, the Jewish chaplain, is helping fulfill the duties of a Muslim chaplain who died a few months ago.

During Passover and summer solstice observances, he said, some Jewish and Native American inmates were unable to attend communal events due to lockdowns in their yards prompted by budget-related shortages in guard staff.

"They had to observe their religious service within their assigned housing unit," said Lt. Dean Spears, a spokesman for the facility.

Indiana's prisons—which have nine vacancies among 37 chaplain positions—have had similar restrictions when overseen by skeleton crews at times when inmates might have attended chapel, said Stephen Hall, director of religious services for the Indiana Department of Correction.

When there's a drastic cut in chaplains, as in North Carolina, questions arise about everyday religious concerns as well as special or weekly observances.

"Lay people tend to think chaplains perform services on holy days," said D. Craig Horn, a North Carolina legislator who opposed his state's chaplaincy cuts. "My view is a professional chaplain adds stability and has a tremendous impact on

promoting calm and providing prisoners with counseling and direction."

Having worked as a church volunteer helping prisoners prepare for the world outside, Horn also knows that volunteers aren't trained to do the kind of multifaith work that chaplains provide daily—whether it's kosher meals for Jews, prayer rugs for Muslims or sage and sweet grass for American Indians to burn as they offer praise to the Four Winds.

Pat Nolan, vice president of Prison Fellowship, said chaplains are the ones most likely to help inmates after riots, rapes and other traumatic incidents or to facilitate special requests—like a phone call from a relative near death.

"For the safety of the institution, it's important that persons going through those horrible situations have someone to help them to defuse the situation," he said. "Otherwise, tension can get really high or out of control."

The well-being and safety of prisoners aren't the only reasons to keep chaplains. There are legal issues too, state prison officials say.

The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 puts government agencies on alert that they can't get in the way of the free religious practice of prisoners.

With no professional chaplains left in North Carolina's medium- and minimum-security prisons, that legal requirement has become the biggest headache for Brown, the prison chaplaincy director.

Some worry that the civil rights of prisoners may be violated by volunteer Christian ministries that, however sincere, may also be motivated to make converts. "Inmates have a right to practice their faith while they're incarcerated," said Mark Reamer, a Roman Catholic priest who has celebrated mass at a Raleigh prison for the past 16 years. "Chaplains ensure a certain fairness." —RNS