

Analysis

Item 19: Office of the Governor

Department of Corrections Ombudsman Program

Analyst: Theresa McHugh

Request: Allocate \$250,000 from the Emergency Fund for the Office of the Governor for an ombudsman program to address COVID-19 related investigations and complaint mitigation.

Analysis: The Department of Corrections (DOC) has struggled to manage COVID-19 outbreaks in the state's prison system. The agency has implemented several actions to manage the disease in its institutions, from quarantining individuals, housing units, or entire institutions to limiting movements between prisons, visitation, and programming. Additionally, DOC has added emergency bed capacity to increase social distancing within the prisons and has limited visitors to the institutions, including attorneys and contracted program staff. The Governor has commuted the sentences of 336 adults in custody and regularly reviews lists of eligible inmates for further commutations and releases from custody. Nevertheless, as of January 3rd, 2021, DOC reported nearly 2,500 infections and 22 deaths of adults in custody, and more than 600 staff infections. Habeas corpus lawsuits challenging the conditions of confinement have been filed by 380 adults in custody. In addition, a class action lawsuit has been filed on behalf of those who have contracted COVID-19 in the prison system.

In light of these difficulties, and in an effort to provide more data, transparency, and accountability to the public, funding in the amount of \$250,000 will provide for a contract to establish ombudsman services, including at least one position, specifically related to COVID-19 related investigations and complaint mitigation.

Recommendation: The Co-Chairs of the Emergency Board recommend that the Emergency Board allocate \$250,000 from the Emergency Fund for the Office of the Governor to establish an ombudsman program to address COVID-19 related investigations and complaint mitigation.