

## **LB 832 would make inmates earn 'good time' credits**

Written by Wauneta Breeze  
Wednesday, 19 February 2014 23:34 -

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### **Letter Back Home**

#### **By Sen. Mark Christensen**

Last summer we all read about the terrible actions of a former inmate, Nikko Jenkins, currently charged and accused of murdering four people in Omaha within a short time from his release from prison.

This subject came up last week in the Judiciary Committee where we heard testimony for LB 832.

LB 832 was introduced by Sen. Lautenbaugh from Omaha. The bill seeks to make changes to the good time laws specifically for inmates that have committed violent crimes.

LB 832 amends statute to require violent offenders sentenced after the date of the Act to earn sentence reductions through participation in a department-approved personalized program plan and through good behavior.

Under LB 832, violent offenders may earn sentence reductions of up to 50 percent of their total sentence.

The current good time policy is the opposite. It gives the inmate their 50 percent sentence reduction up front, and takes away good time when an inmate acts up, but only after a hearing.

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The present policy was pushed by Sen. Chambers to lessen the chance that correctional officers abuse their power by giving false reports regarding certain inmates, making it difficult for them to gain good time.

LB 832 is supported by the governor and the attorney general. They believe this creates more incentive for prisoners to do everything possible to cooperate with their personal plans for programming in the correctional system along with an incentive to behave.

I agree with this in principal, but I'm concerned that this may not play out as planned.

In Nebraska, we are currently at approximately 156 percent of capacity in our correctional facilities, with an upward trend. Each new inmate costs an average of over \$35,000 per year.

We have also heard in the Judiciary Committee for some time that even if an inmate signs up for mental health programming, they may sit on a waiting list for years and not get it until just before they are eligible for parole or release.

This is said to be due to the lack of resources and available spots for the inmates. Inmates have had their parole denied because they have not taken the program required in their personal plans, even though they have been signed up.

There is also a possibility with LB 832 that an inmate could be getting good time credit for just being on the waiting list for their required programming, but only receive the needed help shortly before they are released.

This doesn't seem like the most effective way to prepare an inmate for a successful reentry into society. I don't think public safety is best served by a short period of programming prior to release.

I believe we need to find better ways to move non-violent offenders through our system. At the

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same time, we should make sure that violent offenders who will eventually be back in our communities, actually get the help they need.

This will reduce the chance that a dangerous, released prisoner gets out after falling through the cracks of our correctional facilities, whether by poor decisions regarding good time or lack of mental health resources.

We will either spend money on new prisons or more programming resources so compliant inmates can parole on time or early.

Or, we can let offenders out with little or no help before re-entry because of overcrowding. I don't think anyone really wants the result of that option.

Looking for ways to incentivize good behavior and a desire to change is a good thing, but I have come to the conclusion that the good time incentive, as provided in LB 832, can only work if there is enough resources for effective programming.

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