

Authority for Joint Subcommittee

During the 2009 Session, the General Assembly created two distinct joint subcommittees of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees to focus attention on two different aspects of public safety. The first of these joint subcommittees was to examine alternatives to the incarceration of non-violent offenders within the Commonwealth's prison system. The second was to examine the Commonwealth's policies for the financing of the capital construction and operations of local and regional jails. These facilities, which house both local and state-responsible inmates, receive significant support from the state in the form of funding for jail security and other staff positions, per diem payments for inmates, and funding for construction and renovation projects. It is to examine this support that we have convened today.

Prior Reviews of Jails

The Commonwealth's policies regarding reimbursements to localities for the costs of jail construction and operations have been studied many times by legislative subcommittees and the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC). In most instances, these studies were initiated due to concerns about the state's ability to absorb the rising costs associated with supporting jail populations or paying for jail construction projects. Oddly enough, many of those previous reports – some dating to the 1930's – offer statements or recommendations that still resonate today.

Purpose for this Subcommittee

While those previous reports may still resonate today, this subcommittee was not created simply to follow up on past recommendations. Instead, this subcommittee was created to address how the Commonwealth and local governments should work together to maintain the commitment to supporting local and regional jails in the future. This is necessary given the state's current financial circumstances. Revenue continues to fall below estimates. The Governor has announced additional budget reductions for state agencies. Debt service is likely to be limited for the next few years. And, most significantly, the number of local-responsible offenders currently held in local and regional jails has decreased by 1,250 persons statewide. Given these circumstances, this may be the best opportunity to examine the current policies in place for financing jail construction and operations that has emerged in some time.

Conclusion

Ultimately, while this subcommittee will be focused on developing the policies and structure that will govern the Commonwealth's future support for local and regional jails, every member of this joint subcommittee recognizes the importance of local and regional jails and the Commonwealth's financial support for them. And, although, changes in the reimbursement policies for jail construction and operations may occur, Virginia will continue to meet its obligation to support local and regional jails.