Out with older inmates, in with new, La. official urges

By The Associated Press

Louisiana is jailing low-risk infirm and elderly inmates while allowing younger “urban terrorists” to roam the streets, according to the head of the state penal system.

Richard Stalder, a former prison warden who is now secretary of the Department of Public Safety and Corrections, told the Select Senate Committee on Crime and Drugs on Monday that lawmakers at the legislative session starting next week should consider bills to make inmates serving life sentences eligible for parole after they turn 45 and have spent 20 years behind bars.

“We are not very efficient in how we use our beds,” Stalder said. “We should flush our beds (of older inmates who no longer are violent) and put in the 18-, 19- and 20-year-old gang terrorists who keep us from walking our streets.”

Stalder was joined in his request by Baton Rouge attorney Keith Nordyke, who represents all prisoners in the state system who claim the jails are overcrowded. The state is under a federal court order to reduce prison populations and improve conditions at the jails.

Nordyke said there are more than 20,000 inmates in the state prison system, including 15,593 in state prisons and more than 5,300 in parish jails. He said the state has one of the highest incarceration rates in the nation.

Nordyke said more than 2,200 of the inmates are serving full life terms, and another 1,500 are serving practical life terms, or long sentences in which the inmates could die in jail. He said that at the main prison, Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, there are more than 1,000 inmates who are at least 45 years old, and 300 inmates are 60 or older.

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Inmates

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Nordyke said that while crime has gone up 45 percent in Louisiana between 1977 and 1990, the number of people jailed has increased 170 percent during the same period.

“We are taking in 1,000 inmates more than we are letting loose” annually, he said.

Nordyke told the panel that the state cannot build enough jail cells to house all its inmates.

Committee Chairman Sen. John Hainkel, R-New Orleans, said bills will probably be filed for the March 30 legislative session to allow lifers to be eligible for parole after serving 20 years and reaching the age of 45, despite public opposition to releasing inmates.

“You are going to have to convince me that everybody in jail becomes an altar boy at 45,” Hainkel said. “And the first time one messes up after he’s out, there’ll be a hue and cry.”