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America on lockdown: Why the private prison industry is exploding. For-profit companies are buying up any politician they can find to expand their share of the “market”

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On a recent Friday afternoon, with budget negotiations winding down, Arizona state representative John Kavanagh was racing against the clock. His position as House Appropriations Chairman afforded him the opportunity to stuff whatever minor extra provisions he wanted into the budget before it went to a vote the following Monday, and he only had a few hours left to do it.

What was Kavanagh frantically trying to accomplish for his constituents at the last minute? Extra funding for education, since Arizona spends less on educating its children than all but three states? No, Rep. John Kavanagh was trying to secure an extra \$900,000 gift for the GEO Group, the billion-dollar private prison corporation whose state lobbyists came to him at the last second begging with upturned hats. The \$45 million already earmarked for the maintenance of low- and medium-security facilities wasn't enough, they said.

The Arizona Department of Corrections didn't ask for the extra money, nor did anybody push for the prison funds to be included in the Senate budget.

"This came out of nowhere — I mean that," Arizona House Minority Leader Chad Campbell told the Arizona Republic. "No one said a word about it. It wasn't in the Senate budget, it didn't come as a request from DOC. There's something really shady here."

For Kavanagh, there was nothing shady about sweetening the deal with nearly a million extra dollars. On the contrary, he says, it was a moral imperative.

"If somebody cuts you a smoking deal and helps you when you're down, and you get more money back, I think you morally have a responsibility to increase the payments," Kavanagh told the Arizona Republic in a taped interview the following Monday.

Kavanagh is referring to the lowered rate-per-bed the GEO Group offered Arizona as the national economy cratered in 2008. The rate applied to emergency “temporary” beds at two of its facilities to house an overflow of prisoners. In exchange for the discount, the state agreed to meet a 100% occupancy rate for all non-emergency beds at both prisons.

And thank goodness. If it weren't for the flexibility of the GEO Group, how else could Arizona's correction officials reach their forecasted benchmark of 43,000 prisoners—a 9.3 percent increase from current levels—by 2016?

In the end, however, the state legislature may nullify Kavanagh's act of kindness to the private prison industry. Even though the House approved a version of the budget with the extra prison dollars, the Senate Appropriations Committee nixed them, and the two chambers are in the midst of reconciling their different spending plans.

Kavanagh later told the Arizona Republic he would try to retain his gift to the GEO Group unless others found it to be “a deal breaker.”

Baffling, abhorrent, hopelessly out of touch: All criticisms that have been lobbed in the representative's direction since his frenzied fourth quarter Hail Mary for the GEO Group. But his

gaffe makes a lot more sense in consideration of how much influence the prison industry has in his state.

Arizona is one of four states (along with Virginia, Oklahoma and Louisiana) in which state governments are bound to contracts guaranteeing a 95%-100% occupancy in facilities leased by private prisons. Of the four, Arizona's quotas are the most extreme: as part of the aforementioned "deal" in 2008, prison officials must keep a 100% occupancy rate in the two GEO Group facilities and another facility leased to the state by Management and Training Corporation, according to a 2013 report by In the Public Interest. Paradoxically, this may be costing the state more money: An August 2013 analysis from the Tucson Citizen shows that the "per-prisoner, per-day rates" for those particular facilities have increased by an average of 14% since 2008.

The \$45 million allocated for the GEO Group in the state's new budget not only suggests that lawmakers expect an increase in their prison population, but it also indicates that they have little intention of abandoning policies that casually criminalize its citizens. Since these are low- and medium-security facilities, they will likely be places to house petty drug offenders, who make up 20.5% of the state's entire inmate population.

There are also close linkages between the prison industry and Arizona's elected officials. The largest and richest prison firm, Corrections Corporation of America, has 22 lobbyists registered in Arizona; the GEO Group, the second largest, has seven. Both companies have given \$35,000 and \$39,000, respectively, to a number of high-ranking state officials, including Governor Jan Brewer and Representative Kavanagh. And a number of former high-ranking employees in both companies are now positioned in the upper echelons of state political power.

It's easy to pick on Arizona, and it may be tempting to dismiss its deep ties to the punishment industry as yet another unflattering feature of a backwards political culture. But Arizona is just one card up the industry's 50-state deck.

While the total prison population in the country grew 16% between 2000 and 2011, the state private prison population grew 106%. Yet despite this astronomical growth, not a single independent study has ever corroborated the incarceration industry's claim that its services save taxpayers' money. So why has it grown so powerful?

Christopher Petrella, a researcher at UC Berkeley who works on issues of race and incarceration, told AlterNet that there are two reasons for this astronomical growth: Official lobbying and revolving door politics.

Nationally, CCA has spent \$13,990,000 in lobbying over the last eight years, and fanned 178 lobbyists out across 32 states. Similarly, the GEO Group spent \$3,110,000 in national lobbying efforts and has dispatched 68 lobbyists to 16 states in the same period.

Petrella says those figures only tell part of the story. "Official lobbying—the type that requires documentation, oversight and transparency—almost becomes unnecessary with a revolving door between public and private corrections sectors."

Among some of the bigger players he cites are three former directors of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (Harley Lappin, Michael Quinlan and Norman Carlson), all of who went on to chair senior level positions in either CCA or the GEO Group.

With no inherent financial benefit and a pernicious public profile, the industry's only strength is its buying power.