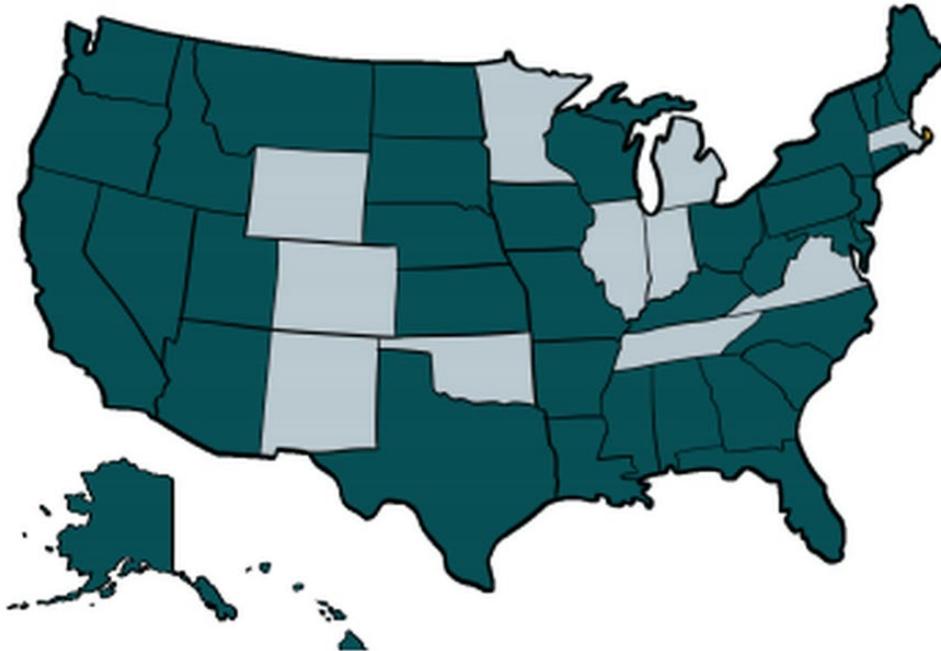


Earlier release, shortened supervision may soon be possible for some Minnesota prisoners

The Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act, announced Friday, would make Minnesota the 39th state to offer inmates early release or abbreviated supervision after completing a series of programs.

Written By: [Nora Eckert](#) | 5:30 am, Mar. 19, 2021

38 other states have earned release policies



38 states offer some form of “earned time,” rehabilitation program for inmates to work toward an earlier release or shortened supervision. Map courtesy of the DOC.

Paul Schnell invokes a hypothetical when he describes “earned time” initiatives: Imagine two people are sentenced to 100 months in prison. In the current system, if one person completes all the available programs — substance abuse training, earns their GED, and learns a specialized skill — they would still serve the same amount of time as someone who did none of those things, or even accrued disciplinary infractions.

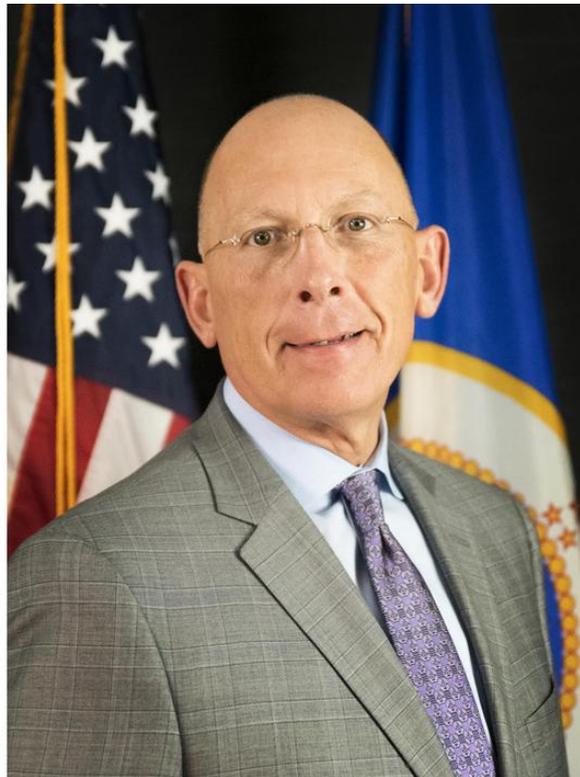
That system may soon change.

Schnell, the state Department of Corrections commissioner, announced Friday that the department would introduce the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act to the Legislature. If passed, it would make Minnesota the 39th state to offer incentive programs for inmates to shorten their time in prison and on supervision by completing individualized rehabilitative programs.

“What we want to do is make sure people are using that time to achieve the kinds of outcomes that are actually going to make Minnesota safer and result in less and less victims,” Schnell said. “Some people say this is just another ploy of being soft on crime. I say no way. This is smart on crime.”

The act would create personalized assessments for each inmate from their first day in prison, digging into their mental and physical health, educational needs and evaluating their outside support network. Then, an internal team would create a plan for the person and meet regularly to evaluate progress, enrolling the inmate in various programs, such as “substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, educational opportunities, vocational skills training,” according to the department’s news release. Eventually, the team would assess if the inmate earned an earlier release or abbreviated supervision.

Schnell said the model drew inspiration from Mayo Clinic’s patient-centered strategies where practitioners collaborate across disciplines to provide the best care possible.



Department of Corrections Commissioner Paul Schnell

[Studies of similar](#) “earned time” programs in Maryland, New York and Washington have shown reduced prison populations, recidivism rates and tens of millions in savings.

For Justin Terrell, executive director of the Minnesota Justice Research Center, it’s a positive step for prison populations and the larger community.

“Who do you want coming home? Do you want someone coming home who has skills? Who’s done the work while they’ve been incarcerated to recognize how they’ve caused harm and take responsibility for that?” Terrell asked. “Or do you want someone sitting in a box for five, 10, 15 years and not doing any of that work?”

The department has prioritized offering these services earlier on in an individual’s sentence, reversing a model that often left them for the later months. Schnell said his hope is the program would also cut

down on recidivism rates in the state, which have stayed relatively stagnant for at least the last decade at around 25 percent.

Terrell said it's essential to make these programs available to people as early as possible.

"No one is more motivated to get out of prison than the first day they step into a prison, right? So get people while they're motivated, put them to work. Make sure they're working on themselves, contributing and learning new skills," he said.

Boosted morale, enhanced security

In Minnesota, about 95 percent of people who are incarcerated will return to the general population. Schnell and Terrell agree: the program gives an inmate a chance to see rewards for taking responsibility in their own progress. And this bodes well for the security of the institutions themselves.

"Morale is a big predictor of safety," said Terrell.

Security is front of mind for the state's correctional officers, said Officer Antonio Espinosa, who has been in the field for about 20 years and now works at Stillwater prison. These concerns were heightened after an inmate killed Officer Joseph Gomm at Stillwater in 2018.

"I think it would definitely improve communication between staff and the population incarcerated," Espinosa said, adding that it would create opportunities for mentorship and relationship building, perhaps eroding the "us versus them" mentality.



Corrections Officer Antonio Espinosa has worked in the field for around 20 years, most currently with MCF-Stillwater. Courtesy of the Department of Corrections.

The program builds upon existing initiatives, such as the challenge incarceration program, which allows eligible inmates to complete intensive physical, educational and substance treatment programs before being placed on supervised release. But Schnell said this effort would be far more comprehensive and inclusive.

As the bill is written now, it would exclude people who have committed certain types of offenses from qualifying from a shortened detention time, such as those who have been convicted of most homicide or sex-related offenses, although they would still be given the same comprehensive evaluation and access to many programs.

As the Ombuds for Corrections, a post independent from the DOC, Mark Haase said it can create problems when certain parts of the population are excluded from such initiatives.

“From a safety and security standpoint, you don't want people who feel like they don't have anything to lose by creating problems,” he said. Overall, he said he sees it as positive for staff and inmates.

A \$10 million savings

The policy offers significant savings for the state: \$10 million a year once fully implemented, the Department of Corrections estimates. The funds saved by not having to house or supervise inmates will be funneled into four areas: victim support services, crime prevention and intervention initiatives, community-based correctional programs, and the state's general fund.

The bill, written by Sen. Ron Latz and Rep. Jamie Becker-Finn, will likely face debate in the next legislative session.

“We're in as good a place as we've ever been for some reforms like this to happen,” Haase said.

As several sources stated, the financial perks of such a proposal aren't the only thing that may help its chances of being approved. Bipartisan support for criminal justice reform has grown in the last few years. Additionally, [George Floyd's death](#) put a spotlight on policing practices, including policies surrounding incarceration.

Espinosa is hopeful the program will create positive changes for correctional officers and inmates, but he knows it's going to come in incremental steps.

“It's going to be a slow start. New beginnings are small,” Espinosa said. “You have to give it time.”