

Minnesota inmates could earn early release, shorter supervision with proposed policy

[Clairissa Baker](#) | St. Cloud Times

ST. CLOUD — As many as half of the people incarcerated in Minnesota prisons could earn early release during personalized rehabilitation programs through a potential new policy.

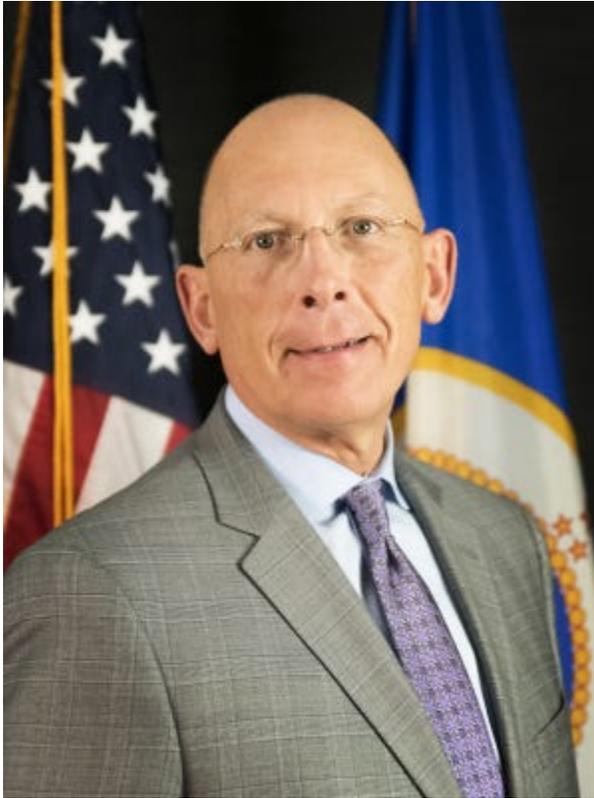
The Department of Corrections announced the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act on Friday. If passed, Minnesota would join 38 other states with an earned-release incentive policy, according to Pew Research data.



The change, if adopted, would be a paradigm shift in Minnesota corrections policy.

"What we really need people to do is use the time (in the corrections system) in a way that is going to be most beneficial and that ultimately provides that rehabilitation or transformation," Department of Corrections Commissioner Paul Schnell told the St. Cloud Times. "It's not about the time, it's about how you spend it."

In a Tuesday interview with the Times, Schnell said the state's current system is pre-determined: People can tell on day one what their release date will be.



But with the Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act, people may earn early release.

How does it work?

If the bill is passed, each person entering a DOC facility would undergo more-robust assessment to identify their needs and set measurable rehabilitation goals. The policy would contain exclusions for people convicted of some types of violent crime.

Rehabilitation plans could include substance use treatment, mental health counseling, educational opportunities or vocational training.

Because the Minnesota Correctional Facility-St. Cloud is the intake facility for men in the state prison system, according to Schnell, the proposed assessments would take place here.

Prisoners who complete their plan are eligible for an earlier release. Once released, they can again earn shorter times on supervision by following a personalized plan.

There are no requests for additional funds associated with the proposal, Schnell said, because the DOC believes it has the capacity to develop programs and use existing staff to provide different types of services.



Corrections workers support plan

Stillwater Corrections Officer Antonio Espinosa said he supports the idea.

"If it goes through," Espinosa said, "it will give the department an edge on how to help people, and it will give the incarcerated the opportunity to engage and take advantage of an opportunity."

Espinosa, who has worked nearly 20 years at MCF-Stillwater, also leads the Art from the Inside program, which allows incarcerated people to create art and exhibit it in the community.

Art from the Inside stemmed from the death of Espinosa's friend and co-worker, Joseph Gomm, who was killed by an inmate in 2018.

After Gomm's death, Espinosa said, there was a lot of division, and he wanted to do something to break that ice.

"I think that it's so important to have incarcerated people engage in some positive things that make them feel like they're part of something that's good," he said.

"If you're not given a second chance to try to do better, then you're going to keep doing the same thing that you did before," Espinosa said.

Benefits of the plan

According to Schnell, the Challenge Incarceration Program in Minnesota, which allows certain individuals to earn early release, has shown that incentives work and help achieve outcomes.

But the proposed policy could also save the state \$10 million per year when it is fully implemented, according to a DOC estimate. Minnesota could save \$38 per person, per day of earned early release.

Savings from the policy would be reinvested in victim support services, crime prevention, community-based correctional programs and the state's general fund.

The policy is expected to make prisons safer by giving people goals and direction.

The DOC said Missouri saw its prison population decline by 18% during the first three years of a similar program with no impact on recidivism rates.

"We think that at the end of the day, what's in the best interest of our communities and what's in the best interest of both victims and people who are in the system is that we make sure we're lifting up both and supporting both," Schnell said.

"We want less victims, we want less wrongdoing," Schnell said. "We want these people that become fully active participants in the community of contributors, producers, consumers."

"Ultimately, if that's what we want, we need to double down in terms of this rehabilitative investment," Schnell said.