

[Click here to sign the letter](#)

**WE THE TAXPAYERS AND COMMUNITY GROUPS OF ARKANSAS URGE
TRANSPARENCY IN THE MEGA PRISON CHARLESTON SITE SELECTION AND
URGE GOVERNOR SANDERS TO INVEST IN EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS THAT
CREATE TRUE SAFETY FOR ARKANSANS**

As early as 2016, the drums were beating to expand the prison population in Arkansas. Arkansas taxpayers spent \$16.5 million dollars to hire Vanir Construction Management, a Sacramento, California-based company responsible for site selection, architectural planning, and construction oversight for the mega prison. On October 31, 2024, the Sanders Administration announced that the state purchased an 815-acre property for \$2.950 million in Charleston, AR to build a 3,000-bed prison. The land purchase happened without community participation or transparency and marks a major step backward for Northwest Arkansas and the state at large.

Arkansas has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, with roughly 900 people incarcerated for every 100,000 residents. In 2023, Arkansas spent \$392,168,896 of taxpayer money on prisons.¹ 3,000 new beds will have an operation cost of \$76,836,150 or a 20% increase to the ADC budget that has yet to be addressed- calculated at \$70.17/day per person cost.² A 4,000-bed mega-prison in Alabama went from an estimated \$623 million to \$1.2 billion.³ For this Charleston facility, construction costs are estimated at \$900 million given Alabama's construction costs which is \$570,000,000 over the budget set aside of \$330 million for this project. This \$401 million gap will likely result in increased taxes to fund this new mega-prison.

Prisons in Arkansas are consistently understaffed year after year and have not utilized all taxpayer-funded beds today due to this staff shortage. According to the Shared Services Board Report by the Department of Corrections, in July 2024, there was a 43.80% vacancy across all correctional facility positions.⁴ The logical question should be, how can Arkansas staff a new mega-prison when the prison system is already unable to staff the prisons it has?

¹<https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Home/FTPDocument?path=%2FAssembly%2FMeeting+Attachments%2F00%2F26238%2FExhibit+I.05.d+-+DOC+-+DOC+Annual+Cost+Per+Day+Report-+FY23.pdf>

²<https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Home/FTPDocument?path=%2FAssembly%2FMeeting+Attachments%2F00%2F26238%2FExhibit+I.05.d+-+DOC+-+DOC+Annual+Cost+Per+Day+Report-+FY23.pdf>

³<https://www.wbrc.com/2024/08/13/new-alabama-mega-prisons-price-tag-now-double-its-original-projected-cost/>

⁴ https://doc.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/DOC-Shared-Services-Board-Report_-July-2024.pdf

[Click here to sign the letter](#)

Governor Sanders stated that this new mega-prison would offer “millions of dollars in investment,” for Northwest Arkansas and offer “hundreds of permanent, recession-proof jobs.” She calls this expansion a solution for our ‘failed system,’ but this could not be further from reality. Prisons, particularly mega prisons, come with significant financial and social costs and fail to address the root causes of crime. Arkansas should invest in proven solutions that support rehabilitation, address mental health and addiction, reduce recidivism, and initiatives that improve public safety. Research has consistently shown that communities of color and lower-income populations are often the most affected by mass incarceration. Building more prison beds only continues this cycle of inequality and does nothing to alleviate the societal challenges that often contribute to crime.⁵

Not a single state has built itself out of prison overcrowding. However, there are examples of states across the U.S. that have reduced incarceration rates, saved money, and experienced no corresponding increase in crime. For example, New Jersey reduced its prison population by over 50% since 2011 by implementing programs to divert nonviolent offenders and support their reentry into the community with the crime rate.⁶ Arkansas could follow similar models reducing those incarcerated instead of expanding prison capacity. These Arkansas taxpayer funds should be used to focus on policies that would reduce the state’s prison population over time contributing to greater community safety and return on taxpayer’s investment which is a stated goal for the Protect Arkansas bill.

Roughly 40% of people incarcerated in Arkansas suffer from mental health conditions and substance use disorders.⁷ Despite this, correctional facilities rarely have the resources or trained personnel to provide adequate mental health treatment. Mental health courts and drug treatment programs are diversion tools that have been proven to reduce crime and improve outcomes for people in crisis. By expanding access to these services, Arkansas could see a more cost-effective reduction in incarceration rates without “investing” in new prison facilities.⁸

⁵<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/mass-incarceration-has-been-driving-force-economic-inequality>

⁶https://www.aclu-nj.org/sites/default/files/field_documents/2017_12_13_mass_incarceration_vision.pdf

⁷<https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/Reentry-Waiver.pdf>

⁸<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/expanding-access-to-basic-reentry-services-will-improve-health-well-being-and-public-safety/>

[Click here to sign the letter](#)

If we are looking to truly be tough on crime, rather than providing temporary relief by expanding capacity, Arkansas must aim to reduce the need for prison beds by addressing the root causes that push people into the criminal legal system in the first place. We, the undersigned, demand permanent lasting solutions that reduce incarceration in Arkansas, such as investments in community-based mental health and substance use programs that make our communities safer and healthier.

Signed,

ACLU of Arkansas

Arkansas Coalition for Peace and Justice

Arkansas Community Organizations

Arkansas Justice Reform Coalition

Arkansas Progressive Democrats Caucus

Central Arkansas DSA

Central Arkansas Food Not Bombs

DecARcerate

Diva and Dudes

Intransitive

Little Rock Freedom Fund

Little Rock Peace for Palestine

Marche Farm

National Lawyers Guild, Arkansas Chapter

Nayborhood Activists

OMNI Center for Peace, Justice & Ecology

Taste of Olam Haba

[Click here to sign the letter](#)



Arkansas Justice
Reform Coalition

