



PROGRAM EVALUATION DIVISION

NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Modifying Criteria for North Carolina's Medical Release Program Could Reduce Costs of Inmate Healthcare

Summary

The Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee directed the Program Evaluation Division to examine the efficiency and economy of inmate healthcare. This report is the fourth in a four-part series and focuses on North Carolina's medical release program for inmates. Such programs allow for the release of inmates for certain reasons (e.g., age, medical condition) prior to serving their entire sentence in prison. A primary objective of such programs is to limit prison healthcare expenditures for older inmates, which are typically four to five times higher than those of other inmates. In North Carolina, the State pays an estimated \$27,748 more each year per inmate providing healthcare for elderly inmates than for non-elderly inmates.

Advocates and opponents disagree on the merits of medical release programs. Advocates contend that qualifying inmates have lower recidivism rates and that their release shows compassion and potentially reduces overall state expenditures. Opponents contend that these inmates still pose a public safety risk and that their release compromises justice and could have a damaging psychological impact on victims.

Established in 2008, North Carolina's medical release program is somewhat more stringent than programs in other states. The State's program requires inmates be at least 65 years old and/or meet certain medical criteria, not be convicted of certain offenses, and be considered a low public safety risk. The State's relatively older age requirement and prohibition of sex offenders makes its criteria more stringent than several other states.

The State releases an average of 13 inmates per year through medical release. As is required to be reported to the General Assembly, the number of medical release requests has varied from 51 in 2012 to 79 in 2017. The number of inmates approved for medical release is similar to other states, suggesting the State's program is functioning well and further indicating there is limited opportunity to achieve greater cost savings.

States experience similar factors that restrict the cost savings they achieve from medical release programs, but modifications to state law could lead to more inmates being approved for medical release. If the General Assembly seeks to broaden the pool of qualifying inmates, it should consider expanding eligibility to inmates convicted of Class B crimes, lowering the minimum age to 60, and expanding eligibility to those inmates diagnosed as having less than 18 months to live.