



Recent Developments in Prison Oversight in the United States: Building Bipartisan Momentum (2018 – 2026)

Sydney Mike-Mayer and Michele Deitch*

Prison and Jail Innovation Lab

July 2026

Executive Summary

In recent years, prison oversight has emerged as one of the few areas in criminal legal reform capable of sustaining broad, bipartisan support. Driven by public demand for transparency and accountability and policymakers' need for reliable, objective information about prison conditions, states across the political spectrum have enacted legislation with increasing frequency to create or strengthen independent prison oversight bodies. This

momentum reflects a growing consensus that meaningful oversight benefits incarcerated people, correctional staff, legislators, and the public alike by promoting more humane correctional environments, improving safety, and informing fiscally responsible, evidence-based policy decisions.

* Sydney Mike-Mayer is a graduate research assistant with the Prison and Jail Innovation Lab (PJIL) and a graduate student at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. Michele Deitch is Director of PJIL and a Distinguished Senior Lecturer at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. PJIL operates the National Resource Center for Correctional Oversight (www.prisonoversight.org). Any correspondence about this Policy Brief should be directed to: Michele.Deitch@austin.utexas.edu.

This Policy Brief reviews recent developments in the correctional oversight field in the United States, with particular attention to how bipartisan cooperation has shaped the creation of these bodies, and how their design determines their effectiveness. While many oversight bodies share similar mandates, their ability to fulfill those mandates varies widely based on structural choices related to independence, staffing capacity, and, critically, sustained funding.

By highlighting these emerging oversight models, this brief demonstrates that prison oversight is not only an effective reform tool, but also a politically durable one, capable of attracting bipartisan support and serving as a viable foundation for future reform efforts. It underscores a central lesson evident

across jurisdictions: the establishment of an oversight body is a significant first step, but its long-term impact depends on whether lawmakers pair well-designed enabling legislation with the resources and support necessary for meaningful implementation.

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Background

Correctional facilities are, by design, closed institutions, with an iron curtain restricting public awareness of conditions behind bars and the treatment of incarcerated individuals. Persistent concerns, including inadequate medical care, staffing shortages, and the excessive use of isolation, have long underscored the need for stronger, independent oversight. Oversight bodies use tools such as unannounced inspections, confidential complaint intake, and public reporting to prevent harm by identifying and calling attention to systemic problems before they escalate into constitutional violations, serious injury or death, or costly litigation. Policymakers' shared interest in ensuring constitutionally adequate conditions, preventing avoidable harm, and reducing exposure to expensive lawsuits

provides a natural point of bipartisan alignment.

Over the past decade, media investigations and public reports have illuminated troubling conditions in prisons and jails, sparking widespread calls for reform. Exposés and high-profile incidents have increasingly prompted demands for independent oversight, meaning mandated scrutiny from an external entity structurally independent of the correctional agency it oversees.¹ Historically, there have been few such models of oversight mechanisms in the United States.² In recent years, however, the landscape has shifted dramatically. Since 2018, nine states plus the federal government have established or re-established fully independent oversight bodies, nearly doubling the number of

states with such mechanisms.³ One additional state has substantially strengthened the authority of its independent prison oversight body,⁴ while two others have created quasi-independent entities⁵ and another state established an oversight pilot program.⁶ Numerous additional states have introduced legislation to establish or strengthen oversight bodies, and these efforts have gained traction in successive sessions.

These newly established oversight bodies vary in structure, authority, and available resources, but they share a common commitment to enhancing transparency. Many of the bills creating these oversight structures were enacted with broad bipartisan support, reflecting a growing national consensus on the value of independent correctional oversight. Congress's near-unanimous passage of the

Federal Prison Oversight Act in 2024, and its direction to implement the Act in 2026, further underscores this momentum by substantially expanding federal prison oversight nationwide.

Since 2018, nine states plus the federal government have established or re-established fully independent oversight bodies, nearly doubling the number of states with such mechanisms.

The map below illustrates where prison oversight exists in the United States. States marked in blue are those that existed prior to 2018; those entities created since 2018 are marked in purple.



Prison Oversight Bodies Established or Re-established Since 2018

This section explores in detail the fully independent prison oversight bodies that have been created or re-launched since 2018. While these entities differ in many ways, a common thread is that all were designed to be structurally independent of the correctional agency they oversee. Structural independence means that the oversight body does not fall under the organizational structure of the corrections agency, nor is it dependent on the corrections agency for its budget, staffing, or administrative support services. Rather, it has an arms-length relationship with the agency it monitors.

Washington (2018)

Following almost ten years of advocacy from a broad coalition of organizations, in 2018 the Washington State Legislature enacted bipartisan legislation that created the Washington Office of the Corrections Ombuds (OCO). Prior to this, the Washington State Department of Corrections operated an internal ombuds position that was not structurally independent and reported only to department leadership. The Washington State OCO was the first independent oversight body in the United States to be established that considered and incorporated guidance from the American Bar Association regarding ways to make oversight effective. The OCO conducts facility visits and investigates complaints, systemic issues, and deaths in custody. Many states that have created oversight bodies since 2018 have used the Washington statute as a jumping off point for their own legislation, though some have also expanded upon the language in that

statute to create even more robust authority and mandates.

With a FY2025 budget of \$2.5 million and a staff of 15, the OCO oversees 11 state prison facilities that incarcerate 13,075 people. More information about Washington's prison oversight model can be found [here](#).

Hawaii (2019)

After a 2016 legislative task force examined correctional reform models, including Norway's rehabilitative approach, Hawaii's Legislature moved to establish the Correctional System Oversight Commission (HCSOC) in 2019 with near-unanimous lawmaker support. HCSOC was created to provide independent oversight of the state's unified prison and jail system. The staff conduct inspections, monitor reentry programming, and address systemic issues across Hawaii's correctional system. Notably, implementation was delayed for several years due to funding challenges. Although the enabling statute authorized HCSOC's work, the Governor initially withheld appropriations in 2020 and 2021, effectively preventing staff hiring. In late 2021, HCSOC received approval to hire its first full-time Oversight Coordinator, and in 2022 began gradually expanding its staff. Budget ambiguity persisted through 2023, when the Legislature declined to fund operations. At that point, the Governor's Office stepped in to provide temporary support. In 2024, legislative efforts to defund the agency were ultimately rebuffed following significant public advocacy, resulting in permanent funding for the

Oversight Coordinator and five additional staff members as well as administrative support.

As of FY2025, HCSOC operates with an annual budget of \$462,134 and a staff of six. HCSOC oversees four state prisons and four state-operated jails, as well as a contracted prison facility in Arizona, that in total incarcerate almost 5000 people. More information about Hawaii's oversight body can be found [here](#).

Minnesota (2019)

Minnesota's Office of the Ombuds for Corrections (OBFC) was originally established in 1972, but it was defunded and functionally eliminated in 2003. In 2007, the Minnesota State Legislature funded a Corrections Ombudsman Working Group, chaired by the Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, to evaluate whether the Ombudsman should be reinstated. Although the group did not reach consensus on reinstatement, it strongly supported creating a bridge between the Minnesota Department of Corrections and the public.⁷ However, that was not enough. In the absence of an Ombuds office, reports of medical neglect and physical and sexual violence by correctional staff and other incarcerated individuals continued.

After the deaths of two corrections officers months apart, calls for reinstatement of the Ombudsman intensified, prompting the Legislature to re-establish the office in 2019. The OBFC began accepting complaints in September 2020. The OBFC investigates complaints about correctional staff and facilities, monitors systemic issues, and provides policy recommendations, while ensuring correspondence from incarcerated individuals remains confidential. The OBFC

is unusual in that it has responsibility for overseeing local jails as well as state prisons, and it coordinates with the Minnesota Department of Corrections' Jail Inspection, Enforcement, and Licensing Unit to avoid duplicating oversight efforts in local facilities. Staff have statutory authority to inspect facilities, access records, and make recommendations for policy or procedural changes.

As of FY2024, OBFC operates with a budget of \$1.1 million and a staff of eight. OBFC oversees 11 state prison facilities and 150 local adult and juvenile facilities that incarcerate approximately 8,306 people. More information about Minnesota's oversight body can be found [here](#).

New Jersey (2020)

Though originally established in 1972, New Jersey's prison oversight body was shifted among units of government in the early 2000s, was only minimally funded, and became fairly obsolete. In 2020, in response to public concern about high-profile violence and sexual victimization in the state's prisons, the New Jersey Governor signed into law legislation that substantially overhauled and expanded the office. Now called the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson (OCO), the oversight body was given broad authority by the New Jersey State Legislature to conduct inspections, review systemic issues, investigate complaints, and publish findings related to conditions in correctional facilities. The state hired a new Ombudsman in 2022 to lead the office and invested in expanding staff capacity and formalizing complaint review processes.⁸

In recent years, the OCO has produced a substantial body of public-facing work, including annual reports, facility-level

inspection reports, and special issue reports addressing topics such as deaths in custody, medical care, temperature extremes, visitation, and the use of phone restrictions. It publishes the findings of both announced and unannounced inspections and holds regular town halls for the public, primarily family members of incarcerated people, to share its annual report and gather community input. New Jersey's OCO is currently one of the most robust and active correctional oversight bodies in the country, reflecting comparatively strong funding, sufficient staffing, and clear support from the governor and legislators.

As of FY 2025, the OCO operates with an annual budget of \$2.8 million and a staff of 26. The OCO oversees nine state prison facilities that incarcerate approximately 13,000 people. More information about New Jersey's oversight body can be found [here](#).

Oregon (2022)

Oregon's Office of Corrections Ombudsman was re-established in 2022 after decades of inactivity, despite having existed in statute since the 1970s. The Office had been unfunded, and the Ombudsman role left unfilled, until renewed legislative interest emerged in response to mounting lawsuits over prison conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ombudsman holds broad statutory authority to inspect facilities without notice, issue subpoenas, and investigate complaints regarding actions by the Oregon Department of Corrections that are unlawful, unreasonable, or unfair. Lawmakers subsequently allocated limited funding in the 2022-23 budget to revive the office and appoint a new Ombudsman.

The first Ombudsman, appointed in 2022, served as the sole staff member overseeing Oregon's entire prison system. However, he

was fired from the position in 2024 amid reported challenges related to limited resources and tension with the Governor's office.⁹ A new Ombudsman was appointed in early 2025. Although the Office continues to operate with the same limited resources since 2022, the new Ombudsman has made some notable changes, such as implementing a new database and voicemail system to improve opportunities for incarcerated people to submit complaints. But its minimal budget means that the OCO has not been able to act on much of its authority.

As of FY 2025, the Ombudsman operates with a budget of \$365,928 and one employee—the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman oversees 12 state prison facilities that incarcerate approximately 12,000 people. More information about Oregon's oversight body can be found [here](#).

Connecticut (2022)

Connecticut revived and strengthened its correctional oversight model in 2022 with fairly broad bipartisan support, creating a two-part system composed of the Office of the Correction Ombudsman (OCO) and the Correction Advisory Committee (CAC). This structure represents the first independent oversight of Connecticut's prisons since the pre-existing ombudsman office was dissolved in 2011 due to budget cuts. The newly established office was slow to get off the ground, due to challenges in appointing an Ombudsman, but an interim Ombudsman was named in mid-2024, and his appointment was made permanent in early 2025. The new OCO is authorized to conduct prison inspections, investigate complaints, publish reports, and make recommendations to the Connecticut General Assembly. Although implementation

of the office's responsibilities has been gradual due to limited resources (it was initially funded for only two staff members), the state has made notable progress in expanding capacity following legislation passed in June 2025 that nearly doubled the office's budget and authorized five additional staff positions.

For FY2025, the Connecticut State Legislature allocated \$790,000, nearly doubling the initial allocation of \$400,000. The OCO currently operates with the Ombudsman and a team of legal and graduate interns. The OCO oversees 13 state prison facilities that incarcerate approximately 10,584 people. More information about Connecticut's prison oversight model can be found [here](#).

Virginia (2023-2024)

In 2023 and 2024, Virginia created a two-part prison oversight structure: the Office of the Department of Corrections Ombudsman (Ombuds Unit) and the Corrections Oversight Committee. The Ombuds Unit is responsible for regular inspections of prisons and investigations of complaints. The Oversight Committee, composed of legislators and gubernatorial appointees, reviews the Ombuds Unit's work, coordinates with the Department of Corrections and the Governor, and supplements inspections with at least one annual unannounced review.

After an initial bill to create the Ombuds Unit failed in 2023 amid strong opposition from prior VADOC leadership who cited purportedly astronomical costs,¹⁰ lawmakers instead established the office through the budget process that same year, and then they unanimously agreed to codify the office through traditional legislation in 2024. This bipartisan effort was driven by widespread

concerns about safety and health conditions in state prisons. The Virginia General Assembly approved over \$1.5 million in funding across two years for the office. In September 2024, the state appointed its first Corrections Ombudsman, marking a major step forward in institutionalizing oversight in Virginia. By August 2025, the Ombuds Unit released a strategic plan identifying the need for additional full-time staff to meet its mandate.

In FY 2026, the Ombuds Unit will operate with a budget of \$718,855, and a staff of six, including the Ombudsman. The Ombuds Unit oversees 50 state prison facilities that incarcerate approximately 22,767 people. More information about Virginia's prison oversight model can be found [here](#).

Maryland (2024)

In 2024, with unanimous support in the Senate and semi-bipartisan backing in the House, Maryland's General Assembly established the robust and independent Office of the Correctional Ombudsman (OCO) to oversee both the adult and juvenile prison systems. The OCO has authority to conduct inspections, investigate complaints, and review and assess administrative actions taken by the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services and the Department of Juvenile Services regarding matters involving individuals in their custody. It also has the authority to refer criminal charges if an investigation reveals illegal conduct. The state's preexisting juvenile oversight body, the Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit, was transferred from the Office of the Attorney General to the OCO. The office is led by the Correctional Ombudsman, who is appointed by the Governor with Senate confirmation. The newly formed Correctional Ombudsman

Advisory Board, consisting of twelve gubernatorial appointees, supports the OCO by identifying investigative priorities and refining complaint processes.

In FY2026, the OCO will operate with a budget of \$1.9 million and 13 staff members. The OCO oversees 18 detention and correctional facilities that incarcerate approximately 14,455 people. More information about Maryland's prison oversight model can be found [here](#).

The Federal Prison Oversight Act (2024)

The passage of the Federal Prison Oversight Act (FPOA) in 2024 marked a watershed moment for correctional reform. FPOA, which passed Congress with unanimous support in the Senate and strong bipartisan backing in the House, reflects an emerging national consensus that prison oversight transcends partisan divisions. Spurred by media investigations and alarming findings from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Inspector General (OIG) about conditions in federal prisons, the law establishes an independent Ombudsman to receive individual complaints, conduct unannounced visits, and issue public reports. It also mandates the OIG to conduct regular, comprehensive inspections of all federal prisons and requires the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to respond to any findings or recommendations with a corrective action plan within 60 days.

Until passage of this legislation, oversight of the federal BOP fell to the U.S. Department of Justice's OIG, which has oversight responsibilities for the entirety of DOJ operations, not just federal prisons. The OIG conducted ad hoc reviews of thematic

issues affecting the BOP and conducted occasional facility inspections but did not handle any investigations of individual complaints, nor did it have the capacity to conduct routine inspections. Thus, the FPOA represents a substantial expansion of prison oversight responsibilities at the federal level.

Surprisingly, given the widespread support for the FPOA, Congress did not appropriate any funds for its implementation at that time. However, in January 2026, Congress directed the DOJ to establish an Ombudsman to carry out the functions included in the FPOA, signaling that funding is imminent. Expansion of the OIG's role in oversight of federal prisons as mandated by the FPOA cannot take place until that funding is provided.

More information about the prison oversight function of the Ombudsman and the Office of the Inspector General for the US Department of Justice is available [here](#).

Arizona (2025)

In 2025, the Arizona State Legislature passed legislation to establish the Arizona Independent Correctional Oversight Office with clear statutory authority to monitor prison conditions, conduct regular and unannounced inspections, and investigate complaints. Designed to operate independently from the Department of Corrections, the Office was statutorily given unrestricted access to facilities, records, and staff, and was directed to issue public reports and recommendations to promote transparency, accountability, and systemic reform.

The passage of this legislation in 2025 followed a previous effort to establish an oversight mechanism by means of an

Executive Order issued by the Arizona Governor in 2023. That entity, the Independent Prison Oversight Commission, issued its first and only public report in 2023 and concluded that it could not conduct meaningful oversight as an all-volunteer, unfunded body.¹¹ The Commission recommended the creation of a formal oversight office with sufficient resources to conduct its duties, and this recommendation led to the passage of the legislation in 2025.

Despite broad bipartisan passage of the bill, the Legislature has not yet appropriated

funds for the Office. Advocates continue to push for needed funding from lawmakers, and are also seeking sources of external funds.

As of mid-2026, the Office has not yet begun operations due to the lack of funding. The Office is intended to oversee 16 state prison facilities that incarcerate approximately 33,000 people. More information about Arizona's oversight body can be found [here](#).

Established Prison Oversight Bodies with Expanded Authority Since 2018

New York (2021, 2025)

The Correctional Association of New York (CANY) is a private nonprofit organization that has served as the state's independent prison oversight body since 1844. In 1846, the New York State Legislature granted CANY statutory authority to enter state prisons, inspect conditions, and report its findings—powers that laid the foundation for nearly two centuries of influencing significant reforms in state prisons. While CANY has long been one of the nation's preeminent prison oversight bodies, it deserves mention here because its authority has been substantially expanded twice in the last few years.

First, in 2021, the New York Legislature codified CANY's authority to enter facilities, conduct inspections with 72 hours' notice, communicate confidentially with incarcerated people and staff, administer surveys, and issue public reports to state leaders.

Then in 2025, the Legislature again acted to strengthen CANY's oversight role, in response to escalating crises in the New York State prison system, including historic levels of deaths in custody, mounting violence, and chronic understaffing. Concerns about these conditions intensified with the widely publicized, fatal beatings of two incarcerated individuals at the hands of correctional officers in 2024. The Legislature thereafter passed a bipartisan omnibus bill to expand transparency and strengthen CANY's monitoring powers by shortening the notice period for inspections to 24 hours, by broadening CANY's access to records, and by improving data reporting and public disclosure of deaths. After a prolonged waiting period, the New York Governor finally signed the bill in December 2025, making New York the latest state to benefit from the national bipartisan momentum to expand and strengthen prison oversight.

Not only did CANY get strengthened authority under the 2025 legislation, it also received substantial state funding to take on additional monitoring responsibilities. The Legislature appropriated just over \$3 million for CANY in 2025. A protracted budget process in 2026 ultimately resulted in another \$3 million in state funding for CANY for the next fiscal year.

In FY 2026, CANY operated with a budget of \$3.64 million and a staff of 17. CANY oversees 44 state prison facilities that incarcerate approximately 32,000 people. More information about New York's oversight body can be found [here](#).

The Establishment of Quasi-Independent Prison Oversight Bodies

While the vast majority of new prison oversight mechanisms were designed to be fully independent of the agencies they monitor, two states established oversight bodies that may best be described as “quasi-independent.” We distinguish them from the fully independent entities because there are structural connections that link them to the prison agency when it comes to funding, websites and domain names, and the reporting lines of authority. Each of these factors could affect the oversight body's perceived and actual independence. However, both entities were explicitly designed so that they operate outside the prison agency's usual hierarchy, and the heads of the office are not subject to hiring or firing by the prison agency director. The establishment of these bodies aligns with the national move towards increased correctional oversight, although research about best practices supports the need for full independence from the corrections agency.¹²

Texas (2021)

Texas's Office of the Independent Ombudsman, created in 2021, investigates complaints and concerns affecting people incarcerated in Texas prisons, which are operated by the Texas Department of

Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Prior to 2021, the prison agency had an internal Ombudsman's office, but following efforts by advocates to legislatively create an entirely new external oversight body, TDCJ restructured the Ombudsman's office to locate it outside the agency hierarchy and to give it a measure of independence. Under the new structure, the Ombudsman is appointed by, and reports directly to, the Texas Board of Criminal Justice, the governing body that sets TDCJ policy and appoints TDCJ leadership. This structure provides the office with some separation from TDCJ's day-to-day operations, including protection from interference by the agency director, but it does not constitute full institutional independence because the Ombudsman remains housed within the same administrative framework as the system it monitors. For example, the Ombudsman's budget is included within TDCJ's budget, and it uses the TDCJ domain name for its website. Thus, we consider it to be quasi-independent oversight.

The Ombudsman's office has broad authority to access departmental records; review and investigate non-criminal complaints from the public, incarcerated

people, and state officials; and recommend policy or systemic changes to the Board. Annual public reports summarize complaint trends and resolutions.

As of FY2025, the Office operates with a budget of \$853,142 and 25 staff members, including the Ombudsman. The Office oversees 104 state prison facilities that incarcerate approximately 138,000 people. More information about Texas' oversight body can be found [here](#).

Nevada (2023)

In 2023, Nevada passed legislation establishing the Office of the Ombudsperson for Offenders within the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC). The Office is required by statute to be impartial and operationally independent from the prison agency. The Ombudsperson is appointed by the Board of Prison Commissioners, which decided to outsource the Ombudsman role to a private outside contractor beginning in 2024.¹³ Such a contracting arrangement is unique among states with prison oversight bodies. The Ombudsperson serves at the pleasure of the Board, a gubernatorially appointed Commission that sets policy for the prison agency and hires the prison director, rather than NDOC, signaling some structural independence. But because the Board has important management responsibilities for

the prison agency, it cannot be considered a fully independent body. Moreover, perceived legal or constitutional violations are required to be reported to the prison director, which further limits the Office's independence.

Under the terms of the statute, the Ombudsperson is empowered to investigate and attempt to resolve grievances related to matters under NDOC's control, including allegations of abuse or neglect, violations of state law, and actions inconsistent with NDOC policy. The Office may also identify systemic issues and propose corresponding policy or procedural changes. In practice, however, the Office has functioned essentially as a Level II reviewer of grievances denied by the agency, rather than as a true oversight body that handles complaints received from a variety of sources and that assesses systemic concerns. Information about the Office's work, including its annual reports, are not publicly available, which limits transparency about prison conditions.

The cost of the contract is also not publicly available information, though the Legislature appropriated \$350,000 for FY 2024-25. The contractor is responsible for reviewing grievances from 11 state prison facilities that incarcerate approximately 10,500 people. More information about Nevada's oversight body can be found [here](#).

Pilot Program — Baby Steps Towards Oversight

Alabama (2026)

While Alabama has not yet passed a prison oversight bill, the Legislature did establish a prison oversight pilot project in 2025 that is worth noting.

In 2025, an Oscar-nominated HBO documentary, *The Alabama Solution*, brought renewed national attention to longstanding and well-documented dangerous conditions in Alabama's prisons, including overcrowding, rampant violence,

and allegations of coordinated abuse by corrections officers—conditions that a 2020 U.S. Department of Justice investigation had already flagged.¹⁴ State Senator Larry Stutts introduced SB 316 to create an independent Prison Oversight Coordinator within the Alabama Department of Examiners of the Public Accounts (EPA), repeatedly citing the documentary as motivation for his legislation.¹⁵ If passed, the bill would have established a new oversight office in the EPA responsible for monitoring correctional officer safety and retention, as well as systemic issues affecting the health, safety, and rehabilitation of incarcerated people.

Rather than advancing SB 316 to a full vote, however, Republican legislative leadership instead announced a one-year prison oversight pilot program in collaboration with the EPA. Drawing on elements of SB 316, the pilot grants certain EPA employees unannounced access to selected facilities, requires public data collection and reporting,

and authorizes recommendations for improvement. The program will begin with an audit of a single unspecified prison, with the EPA carrying out most of the monitoring responsibilities as originally described in SB316. The pilot will rely on existing EPA staff and will not require additional funding. The audit is intended to inform future legislative decisions about oversight and needed improvements to the Alabama prison system.¹⁶

Alabama's pilot project represents a cautious, preliminary step towards oversight. While it does not create a formal independent oversight structure, it tests the waters by gathering information from an independent audit while leaving open the possibility of broader oversight legislation in future sessions. That this measure is happening in a state that is a conservative stronghold speaks volumes about the growing bipartisan recognition about the importance of independent correctional oversight.

Bucking The Tide: A Rare Pullback from Oversight

While virtually every development in the oversight field in recent years has been a testament to the widespread national support for expanded oversight authority, one state, Ohio, has bucked that tide by disbanding its longstanding prison oversight body. While the full impact of Ohio's pullback has yet to be seen, this action stands as a reminder that prison oversight remains fragile and vulnerable to political winds. Oversight bodies need greater stability and protection from shifting levels of political support if they are to fulfill their promise of ensuring transparency and

accountability for the protection of people in custody.

Ohio (2025)

In the 2025-2026 biennial budget, Ohio abolished the Correctional Institution Inspection Committee (CIIC), a bipartisan legislative body established in 1977 to give the General Assembly greater insight into the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) and to provide preventive, monitoring-focused oversight of state correctional facilities. Over the past decade, CIIC's role had become

increasingly constrained. In 2016, concerns raised by some legislators about CIIC's work led to calls for the director's resignation, resulting in the director ultimately stepping down to preserve the body. Later, many staff members departed and were not replaced, at one point leaving CIIC with a single staff member. A 2017 proposal unsuccessfully sought to transfer inspection duties to the Inspector General, which would have removed CIIC's public-reporting function. Despite these challenges, the CIIC rebuilt its capacity and by 2019-2020 had returned to what it regarded as full staffing.

But during the 2025 legislative session, with no advance warning, the CIIC's dedicated appropriation was eliminated and the CIIC's

statutory responsibilities were transferred to a new Office of Correctional Facility Inspection Services housed within the Attorney General's Office. The AG's office did not receive any funding to take on these new oversight responsibilities, and as of early 2026, there does not appear to be any implementation of the new structure.

Moreover, advocates have raised concerns that the AG's office has a conflict of interest when it comes to prison oversight since they also represent the prison agency in lawsuits about conditions issues. The new structure also does not carry forward CIIC's public meeting requirements.

More information about Ohio's previous oversight body can be found [here](#).

Discussion: Lessons from Emerging Oversight Models

The examples highlighted in this brief reveal a consistent set of lessons about what it takes for prison oversight to move from statutory creation to meaningful implementation. Across jurisdictions, the public demand for accountability coupled with bipartisan political support have been powerful catalysts for passage of legislation to create oversight bodies. However, the passage of enabling legislation is not enough to ensure that oversight will be meaningful. The effectiveness of these oversight bodies depends on various factors that follow the passage of legislation, especially decisions related to funding and staffing, as well as sustained political support for the work of the oversight entity.

One clear lesson is that consistent and adequate funding is essential for oversight bodies to carry out their mandates. States

that have paired oversight legislation with reliable appropriations that support sufficient staffing have been better positioned to conduct regular inspections, respond to complaints, issue public reports, and engage with affected communities.

Conversely, where funding has been limited, unstable, or withdrawn over time, oversight functions have narrowed or effectively disappeared even when statutory authority remains intact. And in some cases, no funding was ever provided by the Legislature, meaning that those oversight bodies never got off the ground despite the enabling legislation. These divergent experiences underscore that while oversight bodies often enjoy strong bipartisan support at the point of enactment, their effectiveness depends on whether that support is sustained through consistent, reliable, and sufficient funding. Without continued

investment, even broadly supported oversight bodies can struggle to carry out their mandates in practice.

The state summaries also reveal that there is no standard guideline for determining the appropriate level of resources for an oversight body or the number of staff it will need to conduct its work. Appropriate resourcing depends on a range of factors, including the size of the incarcerated population, the number and location of correctional facilities, and the scope of the oversight body's authority and responsibilities. Policymakers determining funding levels should consider not only the initial costs of establishing an office, but also the ongoing resources needed to support professional staff capable of fulfilling their mandates.

Lastly, a critical finding is that there is a clear distinction between those oversight bodies designed and implemented with true independence from the agencies they oversee, and those quasi-independent bodies where there is either structural or

perceived dependence on the correctional agency. The former has the latitude to conduct meaningful investigations and assessments without a perceived conflict of interest, while the latter may struggle to demonstrate to outside stakeholders that its activities and findings are trustworthy.

Taken together, these lessons provide the key takeaway of this brief: prison oversight legislation represents a rare area of bipartisan consensus, but the success of correctional oversight is not guaranteed by legislation alone. Design choices, especially those relating to staffing levels, funding stability, and independence, shape whether oversight bodies can fulfill their mandates or exist merely in name only. Finding ways to insulate the oversight body as much as possible from political dynamics in the state is also important, so that the office can remain neutral, independent, and effective. For policymakers seeking durable, effective oversight mechanisms, attention to these implementation details is as important as the decision to create the entity itself.

Conclusion

Independent prison oversight is gaining unprecedented traction across the United States. Since 2018, numerous states, and now the federal government, have enacted laws to create or strengthen oversight bodies. These oversight bodies are actively conducting inspections of prison facilities, investigating individual complaints, issuing publicly available reports about their findings, and holding public meetings to gather input and keep the community informed. While implementation and funding challenges persist in some jurisdictions and

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one state inexplicably disbanded its longstanding oversight body, the overall trend is clear: bipartisan cooperation and public demand are driving a sustained movement toward transparency and accountability when it comes to meaningful oversight of prison conditions. Legislation to establish oversight mechanisms is largely passing with overwhelming, bipartisan support, as policymakers see the benefits of, and need for, reliable, objective

information about the state of corrections facilities. The design, staffing, and funding of these new entities will ultimately determine their ability to fulfill their mandates and to achieve the goals of oversight, but their very creation represents a major step forward. In an era of political polarization, prison oversight stands out as a rare and powerful example of bipartisan consensus advancing the cause of justice.

Endnotes

¹ Michele Deitch, *Distinguishing the Various Functions of Effective Prison Oversight*, 30 PACE L. REV. 1438, 1440 (2010).

² Michele Deitch, *But Who Oversees the Overseers?: The Status of Prison and Jail Oversight Across the United States*, 47 AMER. J. CRIM. L. 207, 223 (2020), available: <https://utexas.app.box.com/v/ButWhoOverseestheOverseers>.

³ States that have passed legislation since 2018 to establish or re-establish fully independent prison oversight bodies include Washington, Hawaii, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, Connecticut, Virginia, Maryland, and Arizona. Congress also passed the Federal Prison Oversight Act in 2024.

⁴ New York substantially expanded the authority of its existing body.

⁵ Nevada and Texas established oversight structures that are quasi-independent of the correctional agency they monitor.

⁶ Alabama established a pilot prison oversight project.

⁷ Ombudsman for Corrections Working Group, *Report to the Legislature*, (Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2008), <https://www.leg.mn.gov/docs/2008/mandated/080172.pdf>.

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More information about prison oversight and about the models discussed in this brief can be found on the website of the National Resource Center for Correctional Oversight (NRCCO): www.prisonoversight.org.

The NRCCO is the signature project of the Prison and Jail Innovation Lab (PJIL).

PJIL is a national policy resource center at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin working to ensure the safe and humane treatment of people in custody. We work on issues related to correctional oversight, conditions of confinement, and deaths in custody.

Please visit our website at: [www. PJIL.org](http://www.PJIL.org).

Acknowledgments

The Prison and Jail Innovation Lab extends our gratitude to our funders who make this work possible. Special thanks are due to Arnold Ventures for its long-standing support of our work. However, the views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the opinions or positions of Arnold Ventures, the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, or The University of Texas at Austin.

The authors are grateful to Alycia Welch for her insightful comments on this draft and to Allison Paranka for her assistance with readying this brief for publication.

Preferred Citation

Sydney Mike-Mayer and Michele Deitch, Policy Brief: "Recent Developments in Prison Oversight in the United States: Building Bipartisan Momentum (2018-2026)," Prison and Jail Innovation Lab, The University of Texas at Austin, 2026.

Please direct any inquiries about this brief to Michele.Deitch@austin.utexas.edu.

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The University of Texas at Austin

Prison and Jail Innovation Lab

Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Prison and Jail Innovation Lab
Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs
The University of Texas at Austin
2315 Red River St,
Austin, TX 78712
www.PJIL.org
pjil@austin.texas.edu