

By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican

Nebraska's prison system doesn't rank top-of-mind with most of the state's citizens. In fact, it doesn't even come to my mind when I think about the quality of life we enjoy in this great state.

But unfortunately, that great quality of life could be put in jeopardy by an over-crowded and under-served prison population. Under-served, you ask? Prisoners are in prison for a reason so why do they deserve any "services" at the taxpayers' expense.

Last week, the Nebraska Ombudsman's Office released a critical report of the Nebraska's prison system, and more in particular, of the treatment or lack of for Nikko Jenkins .

The Ombudsman's Office said Jenkins, a violent and mentally troubled inmate, spent the last two years of his sentence in disciplinary segregation, an isolation cell where inmates do not receive rehab for things like anger management and mental illness.

Within three weeks of his July 30 prison release, Jenkins allegedly committed four slayings in Omaha, including the random murder of a 33-year-old mother late at night after she got off work.

He went from 23 hours a day in an isolation cell to life back in the real world, a world he wasn't equipped to handle mentally.

As the report pointed out, prisoners in need of treatment for mental illness, anger management, substance abuse, violence and sex offenses simply aren't getting what's needed.

Part of that has to do with what programs specific prisons offer.

The other part comes from the over-crowding in our state prison system. As of Dec. 31, Nebraska's prison system held 4,864 inmates, which is 53 percent over capacity.

Building more prisons isn't the answer.

The governor is looking for ways to address the overcrowding by increasing the prisoner count at the McCook Work Ethic Camp, contracting with county jails and reducing the number of federal detainees in the Nebraska system.

As a society, we have become so "lock-up happy," that our prisons are over-crowded. As a result, proper attention can't be given to inmates ready for release to insure they get the training and support so they don't re-offend.

Every time Nebraska releases a prisoner the likes of Nikko Jenkins with no transition training and support, our safety has been jeopardized.

We can't take a "lock 'em up and throw away the key" attitude if we're going to insure the safety of our citizens and the integrity of our prison system.