Ohio Prisons Shut Off Electricity In Exchange For Payments

BY MARINA FANG, GUEST BLOGGER ON JULY 19, 2013 AT 9:00 AM

Prisons in Ohio are restricting electricity use this week as temperatures skyrocket, due to a monetary agreement between the state and a top power company.

According to the Columbus Dispatch, 24 Ohio prisons have agreed to shut off electricity for periods of three to four hours between 2 and 6 p.m. and have resorted to backup generators because of a cost agreement between the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction and KOREnergy Ltd., the company that provides power to the prisons. In exchange for agreeing to shut off the power on two hours’ notice, the company makes annual payments to the prison system. Since 2010, the agreement has earned the state $1.3 million.

As a result, electricity for fans, lights, and televisions has been limited, even as Ohio, like much of the country, is suffering through a major heat wave, with temperatures soaring into the 90s all week. According to JoEllen Smith, spokeswoman for the department, prisoner cells are not air-conditioned. She said temperatures at London Correctional Institute in Madison County have ranged between 82 and 89 degrees. Smith said the
prisoners are being given cold water and ice, and they can still use ceiling fans, floor fans, and outdoor sprinklers.

But shutting off power can endanger safety and security because it frustrates inmates. Ellen Kitchens, a member of CURE, an advocacy group for prison inmates and their families, told the Dispatch that shutting off power can trigger tension. “Tempers will be flaring because they’re so mad about what’s going on,” she said. She reported that prisoners at London Correctional Institution in Madison County could not take showers because they were not functioning due to the power outage.

And as the ACLU warned in a statement, government agencies should not resort to these types of measures to earn revenue because “it compromises safety and security, not only for the incarcerated, but for the people who staff these facilities,” said director of communications and public policy Mike Bricker.

While this agreement is limited in scope, the instinct to use prisons as a revenue source can have dangerous consequences. Studies of private prisons have shown that profit creates perverse incentives to lobby for incarceration and prioritize revenue over the rehabilitation of prisoners.

Given Ohio’s massive prison population, however, profit from the agreement is likely going to defray the costs of mass incarceration. With 49,710 inmates in its adult prison system, Ohio has the sixth highest prison population in the country. In 2012, to incarcerate an inmate in an Ohio prison cost $24,870 per year, or $68.14 per day. The bulk of these costs went to security, involving “the supervision and control of inmates.”

**UPDATE**  The Department of Rehabilitation and Correction announced that it is reducing the number of participating prisons to five, due to the heat wave. Other prisons will shut off power in one-hour intervals.

_Marina Fang is an intern for ThinkProgress._