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PRIVATIZATION OF PRISONS

November 07, 2011 | by Gretchen Knell

By Ted Volskay

BACKGROUND

Many states have turned to private prisons to address the issues of prison overcrowding and the capital expense of building new prisons, and to reduce the cost of prison operations. In 2011, the corrections services market (including federal and state prisons, but excluding jails) in the United States was valued at approximately $70 billion. The portion of corrections services market that is outsourced to private corporations is approximately 10 percent or $7 billion.1

Advocates of privatizing correctional services state that private prisons can achieve savings over public prisons by purchasing in bulk, eliminating overtime and employee benefits, and reducing the red tape. Opponents of privatizing prison services argue that a true and accurate comparison between public and private costs and services is difficult and complex, and does not provide a compelling argument for privatizing prison services.2

Privatization Case Study: Pennsylvania Child Care Center
Governmental Level: County (Luzerne County)
Primary Privatization Mechanism: Defunding publicly owned and operated juvenile detention center

On February 18, 2011, a federal jury convicted former Luzerne County Common Pleas Juvenile Court Judge Mark A. Ciavarella, Jr., on 12 of 39 counts of racketeering, money laundering and conspiracy in connection with the infamous "Kids for cash" scheme.3 Ciavarella and former Judge Michael T. Conahan reportedly received $2.6 million in kickbacks for sending thousands of juveniles to two private detention centers.4

The scheme began when Robert J. Powell, a wealthy personal-injury lawyer from Hazelton (PA) contacted Judge Michael T. Conahan, Ciavarella's colleague, to learn how he might get a contract to build a private detention center. When Judge Conahan became the "president" judge in January 2002, he obtained control over the county courthouse budget. Judge Conahan subsequently signed a secret deal with Powell, whereby the court would pay $1.3 million dollars annually to rent Powell's private juvenile detention center, in addition to the tens of millions of dollars that the county and state would pay to house delinquent juveniles.5 Two detention centers, Western Pennsylvania Child Care and Pennsylvania Child Care, were eventually constructed in Pittston, Luzerne County.6

Conahan and Ciavarella systematically shut down the public juvenile detention center that was owned and operated by Luzerne County. First, the judges refused to send delinquent juveniles to the public detention center and, then, cut off funds for its operation.7 Although county commissioners were the only ones authorized to sign contracts for detention centers, Judge Conahan left them with little alternative but to sign a contract with the privately owned and operated detention centers because Conahan had eliminated funding for the Luzerne County juvenile detention facility.

A state audit of the private detention center was conducted that described the lease of the facility as a "bad deal." The center's owner filed a "trade secrets" lawsuit against the Luzerne County controller who leaked the findings of the audit, and Judge Conahan subsequently sealed the suit to limit the release of other documents. During a separate audit, state auditors determined that the detention center was systematically overbilling the county and was receiving shutoff notices from utilities because they had fallen behind in paying their bills.8

The "Kids for cash" scheme began to unravel when Ciavarella sentenced a 15-year-old college-bound high school student to three months in juvenile detention after she made fun of an assistant principal on MySpace and was cited for harassment. The girl's mother took her daughter's case to the Juvenile Law Center (JLC), a nonprofit advocacy group that promotes juvenile justice and child welfare reform in Pennsylvania. The JLC determined that their client's case was not exceptional.9 In 2002, Judge Ciavarella sentenced twice as many juveniles to detention compared to the prior year and sentenced juveniles to detention at a rate that was twice the state average over a subsequent five-year period.10 One of the cases involved a 12-year-old boy who went joyriding with his mother's car and ran over a barrier. Although there were no injuries, the car was damaged, and the boy was cited after his mother filed a police report so that insurance would cover the damage. The boy, who was not represented by an attorney, pleaded guilty and spent two years in the detention center.11

The JLC asked the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to assume jurisdiction over all the cases of juveniles adjudicated delinquent in Luzerne County since 2005. The Luzerne County District Attorney opposed it and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court denied the JCL petition without comment. Subsequently, after the FBI began an independent investigation into Ciavarella and Conahan for accepting money from certain

detention center developers, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court reconsidered and granted the JLC petition. One of the developers, who has not been accused of criminal wrongdoing but is a defendant in a class action lawsuit, is the Allegheny County District Attorney's brother and a former Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice's son.[12]

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- This case illustrates the need for stringent state oversight procedures to be firmly in place when transitioning from public sector to private sector detention centers. Furthermore, it is important to monitor changes in patterns of incarceration when for-profit incentives are involved.[13]
- One of the benefits argued by proponents of privatization is that free market competition is ultimately good for the taxpayer. In the case of the "Kids for cash" scheme, defunding the existing county juvenile detention center achieved the goal of privatizing juvenile detention services, while eliminating any meaningful competition that would have existed had the public detention center remained operational.
- Although parents and local child advocates accused the former judge of harsh sentencing, many in the community, including the local schools, supported him. When Judge Ciavarella decided upon a policy to incarcerate juveniles arrested at school, local schools were more than happy to send trouble makers out of town by calling the police for just about any incident that they preferred not to address. Ciavarella himself pointed to the low recidivism rate as justification for his tough judgments.[14]
- Two of the largest private prison corporations, Corrections Corporation of America and Geo Group are publicly traded on the New Your Stock Exchange; NYSE Symbols (CXW) and (GGO), respectively. In fact, consistent with their for-profit culture, private prison corporations include as part of their business plan finding alternative means of filling their facilities.[15] According to Corrections Corporation of America, "Utilization Drives Earnings."[16]
- During the 2008 election cycle, the three largest publicly traded prison management companies contributed approximately $679,000 to political groups and politicians from states where they are courting new business. The boards of directors for Corrections Corporation of America and Geo Group include formerly elected representatives and government officials from former Republican and Democratic administrations.[17]
- In a free market, the consumer chooses between companies that provide a service. The for-profit prison market is different because prisoners cannot choose where or how long they will be incarcerated. Furthermore, prisoners typically do not have a strong representative voice. They are vulnerable to efforts by privately owned/operated detention facilities to increase profitability by reducing or eliminating any prison expense that might not be required but substantially affects prisoner welfare.

Ted Volskay (LWVNC) is a member of the LWVEF Education Study Committee on Privatization of Government Services, Assets and Functions.

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PRIVATIZATION OF A PUBLICLY OWNED WASTE WATER TREATMENT PLANT

November 07, 2011 | by Gretchen Knell

By Ted Volskay

BACKGROUND

Since 1972, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Construction Grants Program has invested more than $67 billion in federal funds into publicly owned (wastewater) treatment works (POTW) throughout the country. Congress initiated the phase out of the Construction Grants Program in 1987 and replaced it with the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) program which provides low-interest loans to communities for the construction of infrastructure projects involving water pollution control. On April 30, 1992, President George H.W. Bush signed Executive Order 12803, directing federal agencies to remove regulatory or procedural barriers to privatizing wastewater POTWs under their control. In addition, Executive Order 12803 required that privatized federally funded POTWs continue to serve their original purposes.1

The first privatization agreement of a POTW under Executive Order 12803 was approved on July 21, 1995, when a private contractor purchased the Franklin, Ohio, POTW for $6.85 million. The Miami Conservancy District owned and operated the wastewater treatment plant that served the residents of the cities of Franklin (Warren Co.), Germantown and Carlisle (Montgomery Co.), Ohio. The combined population of the three cities was approximately 22,000.2 The contractor that had operated the Franklin Plant under contract since 1987 offered to purchase the POTW in 1992. The transaction took two years of negotiation between the Miami Conservancy District, which owned the POTW, and the private contractor. Subsequent to the negotiations was an eight-month state approval process, followed by a four-month federal (EPA and Office of Management and Budget) approval process. The Office of Management and Budget had to agree to the negotiated transfer price since the sale of assets was not competitively bid.3 When agreement was reached on the terms, the City of Franklin, Ohio, became the first municipality in the nation to sell the public asset of a POTW that had been constructed with federal grant funds and enter into a public/private partnership agreement with the new owner.

Privatization Case Study: Franklin, Ohio, Wastewater Treatment Plant
Governmental Level: City (Franklin, Ohio) and County (Warren and Montgomery Counties)
Primary Privatization Mechanism: Asset Purchase and Operation

The Franklin POTW was accepted by the EPA as a privatization pilot project. Planning and negotiations between Franklin officials and the prospective buyer began in the summer of 1994. On July 14, 1995, the City of Franklin received word that the EPA had completed its final review and authorized sale of the POTW. The transaction was completed within two weeks and the contractor that operated the plant since 1987 purchased the POTW in July 1995 for $6.8 million.4

Key to the success of this privatization initiative was 16 months of extensive planning and negotiations. A 20-year service agreement was signed that addresses the following key provisions:5

- Unit rates the city will pay for sewage treatment;
- Acceptable conditions for rate increases;
- Operation and maintenance standards;
- Allocation of environmental liability;
- Protocol for prompt conflict resolution; and
- Renewal of the 20-year contract.

The three most pertinent fiscal considerations were the:6

- Initial sale price of the plant;
- Annual rate and the amount and timing of any increases to the rate; and
- Repurchase price of the plant at the end of the 20-year contract or, as a contingency, repurchase of the plant prior to that date.

A consultant with privatization experience was hired to advise and work with the three city managers during the evaluation and negotiation phase. An advisory board was established to represent the interest of the three cities and two counties, and to provide one voice for the buyer to negotiate with.7

A matrix was devised that compared economic and noneconomic impacts of three alternatives:8

- Alternative 1 - maintaining public ownership of the plant;
- Alternative 2 - creating a regional sewer district; and
- Alternative 3 – privatization.

The Miami Conservancy District retained ownership of the wastewater collection system that directs sewage to the POTW and a small part of the treatment process so that the treatment system could maintain the *publicly owned treatment works* classification and avoid the more stringent and costly requirements that would otherwise be invoked under the *Resource Conservation and Recovery Act* (RCRA). Similarly, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency listed both the contractor and the Miami Conservancy District as being responsible for meeting POTW discharge requirements.[9]

A 20-year agreement was signed that made the private contractor responsible for:[10]

- Financing all plant upgrades and expansions;
- Operation and maintenance of the Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP);
- Administration of the municipal industrial pretreatment program.

The agreement gave the Miami Conservancy District the option to repurchase the POTW at the end of the 20-year term.[11] In addition, all plant personnel were retained under the contract.[12]

The city of Franklin's rates for wastewater disposal were reduced by 23 percent during the first year of the contract and, with the exception of energy and chemical costs, future rate increases were limited to increases in the rate of inflation.[13]

The pace of economic development in the area increased after sale of the treatment plant. Stabilized wastewater treatment fees were reportedly a primary incentive for expanding operations of three area paper industries and a subsequent increase in jobs. Increased economic development was closely followed by an expansion of the water distribution system from approximately 4 million gallons per day (gpd) to 10 million gpd.[14]

The City of Franklin, Ohio, entered into its second public/private partnership on November 1, 1997, when it opened a new 5-million-gallon-per-day water supply treatment plant that was designed, built and financed, and is now operated by a private contractor.[15]

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- The EPA must review and approve all proposals to sell POTW assets when Federal grants have been used to construct the treatment works.[16]
- In addition to the EPA, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) must also review and approve the sale of POTW assets constructed using Federal grants if the transaction price is not established using a full and open competitive bidding process.[17]
- POTWs constructed solely using state revolving loans or local funding may be sold without EPA review or approval.[18]
- EPA review and approval is not required when POTW operations are privatized (subcontracted to a private entity), even if the POTW was constructed using Federal construction grants.[19]

Ted Volskay (LWVNC) is a member of the LWVEF Education Study Committee on Privatization of Government Services, Assets and Functions.

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DEREGULATION OF RAILROADS

November 07, 2011 | by Gretchen Knell

By Ted Volskay

BACKGROUND

In 1870, a practice referred to as "pooling" occurred on a large scale among competing railroads as a means to enforce rate and fare agreements. Competing railroads agreed to the division of rail traffic and receipts at stipulated ratios. Arrangements for the division of rail traffic and receipts were referred to as "traffic pools" and "money pools," respectively. By the late 1880s, strong public opposition to pooling and other monopolistic practices by industry led to passage of the Interstate Commerce Actof 1887.1 Section 5 of the Interstate Commerce Act states:Â

> *That it shall be unlawful for any common carrier subject to the provisions of this act to enter into any contract, agreement, or combination with any other common carrier or carriers for the pooling of freight of different and competing railroads, or to divide between them the aggregate or net proceeds of the earnings of such railroads or any portion thereofâ?¦*

In addition, the Act required that railroad rates be "reasonable and just" and that railroads publicize shipping rates, prohibited short/long haul fare discrimination, and created the Interstate Commerce Commission to hear complaints against the railroads and enforced laws against unfair practices.

By the 1920s, railroads faced significant financial challenges that could be attributed to federal regulations. Regulations at that time required railroads to service low density, unprofitable lines and to set minimum rates.2 Transport of high volume products on major routes was effectively subsidizing unprofitable transport of low volume products on less traveled routes. Consequently, regulatory mandates, forcing railroads into inflexible rate structures and to maintain excess rail capacity, prevented firms from responding to external disturbances such as a recession, a change in interest rates, or large and unanticipated changes in prices.3In addition, regulatory inflexibility rendered the rail industry vulnerable to competitors, including barge transport and the developing truck freight industry.

Direct and indirect consequences of regulations at that time resulted in railroad companies having little incentive to invest in innovative technologies to improve operational efficiency. For example, large railroad companies would benefit from the use of cars with significantly higher hauling capacities. To offset the increased cost of specialized freight cars, the railroad would need to lower rates for the intended customer to induce a higher volume of rail traffic. However, the Interstate Commerce Commission usually opposed the new rate, presumably to protect smaller rail carriers that could not or would not invest in the new and more expensive high-capacity rail cars.4

The cost of union labor also contributed to the financial stress on railroads. An unintended consequence of regulations during this period was the strengthening rail industry labor unions. Industries, like the railroad industry, were dominated by a few large companies, and regulations limited the entry of potential railroad competitors. This benefitted railroad labor unions because the unit cost (per worker) to organize employees was low, and the bargaining power of labor is leveraged when a large proportion of an industry workforce is unionized. In addition, union labor benefitted from regulations that allowed rail carriers to pass wage increases to the consumer.5

Labor unions also contributed to railroad industry inefficiencies. Railroad unions negotiated work rules that defined appropriate crew sizes, which typically included a conductor, two or more brakemen and, sometimes, a fireman. Labor inefficiencies occurred when rail carriers made the conversion from steam-powered to diesel-powered locomotives. That change required fewer crew members, but railroads were bound by union work rules to maintain the crew size. Similarly, the union and the rail industry agreed that the "work day" would be based upon mileage covered. Investments in improvements to increase train speed did not result in the anticipated profit potential for the rail industry because faster trains allowed union employees to work multiple shifts. This increased earnings without markedly increasing the number of hours worked each week.6

Privatization Case Study: Deregulation of Rail Freight Operations
Governmental Level: Federal
Primary Privatization Mechanism: Deregulation

Almost a century of regulating the railroad industry produced shipping rates that were incapable of responding to market changes, such as the emergence of the interstate highway system during the Eisenhower administration and growing competition from the trucking industry. Passage of the Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act in 1976 and the Staggers Rail Actin 1980 provided the flexibility to allow rail pricing to respond to the marketplace, abandon unprofitable routes, and

consolidate operations.7 More importantly, deregulation has put the U.S. rail freight industry on a more secure financial footing.

Since deregulation, rail carriers have been given the latitude to negotiate rates.8 Railroads are now able to negotiate rates directly with shippers, and the rail companies can tailor their capacity and services to the customer's production and inventory policies.9 In addition, railroads are now able to abandon unprofitable routes and consolidate their operations.10 One result of this has been a substantial increase in the number of smaller low-cost, non-union, railroads that bought less profitable railroad tracks from the larger railroads. Surprisingly, the actual competition generated by the market has become more intense compared to level of competition prior to deregulation.11

Deregulation of the rail industry also allowed the railroads to adopt labor-saving information technologies, which made it possible to automate traffic control such as signaling, car management, dispatching and tracking.12 Use of labor-saving technologies led to the elimination of the caboose (last car on a freight train that had a kitchen and sleeping facilities for crew members) and associated crew members.13 This resulted in an overall decline in the railroad workforce of approximately 52 percent from 1973 (pre-deregulation) to 1996. Despite the loss of railroad jobs and the introduction of smaller, nonunionized railroad companies, overall union membership in the rail industry workforce declined by only 9 percent, and the adjusted weekly earnings of rail workers remained about the same over the same 23-year period. 14

External shocks to the economy, such as a change in interest rates, or fluctuations in the price of petroleum as well as deregulation of the trucking industry, have prompted the deregulated rail freight industry to improve customer service and operational efficiency, and rely heavily on innovation. The expanded use of intermodal operations, double stack rail cars, and computerized systems to track trains and manage railroad capacity has led to lower costs for shippers and higher profitability for rail interests.15

Things to Consider

- Although there was competition among railroads, the rail freight business was a virtual monopoly in certain parts of the United States prior to passage of the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887.
- Prior to passage of the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887, barge traffic along major river routes provided the only meaningful competition for bulk transport of freight outside the rail industry.
- Development of bulk transport by truck since the 1930s has provided more competition in the freight transport industry.
- The Interstate Commerce Commission initially was tasked with the authority to regulate railroads and was given the authority to regulate the trucking industry in 1935 following passage of the Motor Carrier Act.
- Competition between the rail and trucking industries became more significant after passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act in 1956 and development of the interstate highway system by the Eisenhower administration.
- Rail and truck freight transport industries were both "deregulated" by 1980. However, passenger rail traffic is dominated by Amtrak, a government owned corporation.
- Railroad unions have remained relatively strong compared to the trucking and airline industries since they were deregulated. This is attributed to the oligopolistic nature of the rail freight business.16

Ted Volskay (LWVNC) is a member of the LWVEF Education Study Committee on Privatization of Government Services, Assets and Functions.

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