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Citing Drop in Inmate Population, Spitzer Plans to Close Four Prisons Upstate

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The Spitzer administration announced on Friday a plan to close a medium-security prison and three minimum-security camps upstate, citing the declining crime and prison population across the state. Officials said the move would save taxpayers upward of \$70 million in the next few years.

The closing of the four prisons — the medium-security Hudson Correctional Facility in Columbia County and the minimum-security camps Pharsalia in Chenango County, Gabriels in Franklin County and McGregor at Mount McGregor Correctional Facility in Saratoga County — will be felt in the counties where the prisons have provided steady, good-paying jobs.

Republican lawmakers and the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association were highly critical of the plan, announced just days after Gov. Eliot Spitzer's pledge to work more closely with Republican leaders.

“We are very concerned with his plan, especially in light of the governor's push to release criminals out of prison early through the parole system,” said Mark Hansen, a spokesman for the Republican Senate majority. “We have some very serious questions about his plan. We want to see his justification for this.” Mr. Hansen said Mr. Spitzer's announcement was particularly distressing to lawmakers whose districts are home to the centers and whose communities depend on prison employment.

But officials from the New York State Department of Correctional Services said the proposed closings were not expected to cause significant layoffs because many employees could be absorbed into other prison department jobs.

The officials said all four complexes were operating at about half capacity with a total of 939 inmates and 584 full- and part-time employees.

The inmates will be transferred to other medium-security prisons when the four prisons are closed in January 2009, said Brian Fischer, the corrections commissioner. State law requires that such closings be announced a year in advance.

“This is long in the works,” Mr. Fischer said. “We’ve been looking at this on and off for the last three, four years, and each year the number of inmates has gone down. The minimum-security facilities are underutilized. We have empty dorms. It’s a good economic and management decision.”

The closings are expected to save taxpayers \$10.4 million in operating costs in the fiscal year 2008-9, \$33.5 million annually in operating costs beginning in 2009-10 and \$30 million in prison capital expenditures, according to the corrections department.

Mr. Fischer said the closings would allow the corrections department to bolster programs for sex offenders, mental health treatment and community re-entry. New laws have enabled the department to move more nonviolent offenders out of correctional facilities and into their communities.

Over the past decade, the number of inmates at medium-security prisons decreased by 18 percent and the number at minimum-security facilities fell by 47 percent, according to corrections data. But this decline was countered by the rise of more violent offenders entering the system. Mr. Fischer said that the cost of meeting the physical and mental health needs of this new inmate population was rising and that the department’s resources needed to be redirected to meet those needs.

Larry Flanagan Jr., the president of the corrections officers’ union, said in a statement on Friday that the union did not support the closings.

“We respect the fact that state leaders face trying fiscal times and many difficult decisions in the upcoming session,” Mr. Flanagan said. “But we remain committed to our members and the communities they work and live in. Along with educating all public officials that closing prisons should never be a first option.”

The state’s 69 correctional facilities held 62,243 inmates as of Friday, down from a peak of 71, 538 in 1999, the corrections department said. The department has about 31,000 employees.

“I’m sure they have some concerns about the loss of certain jobs,” Mr. Fischer said of the plan’s critics.

“There will be some impact, no question, on the local communities,” he said. “But my concern is that I have 32,000 employees. I have to be concerned about where I am going to place my employees in the long haul.”

Separately on Friday, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services announced it would close six residential detention centers upstate for low-level juvenile offenders as part of a continuing effort to overhaul the juvenile justice system.

The agency hoped to cut a total of 241 beds in the system's nonsecure and limited-secure facilities by next year.

The centers being closed serve juveniles convicted of misdemeanors. None of the secure detention facilities that serve children convicted of more serious crimes will be closed.

Juveniles usually sent to the nonsecure centers will instead be allowed to return to their communities on the condition that they and their families accept intensive counseling in their neighborhoods and homes for a period set by a family court judge.

Gladys Carrión, the commissioner of the Office of Children and Family Services, said the governor had proposed to use savings from the closings, which the budget office estimated would be \$16 million a year, to help pay for such locally based rehabilitation services.

“What these children need is intervention and support,” Ms. Carrión said. “We want them to transition safely into the community and not go directly into the penal system, which happens too frequently now.”

The state has been shrinking the residential detention system for children 16 and younger for years because it is widely seen as expensive and ineffective. The average annual cost of keeping a child in one of the centers runs from \$140,000 to \$200,000.