

Albany Times Union

Report critical of prison treatment

Watchdog group cites inadequate services and poor disciplinary measures for mentally ill inmates

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ALBANY -- New York has improved its treatment of mentally ill inmates, but most still lack adequate services and continue to be disciplined in a way that causes their conditions to worsen, according to a report to be released today a prison watchdog group.

Approximately 7,500, or 11 percent, of state inmates suffer from mental illness, and half of those have a serious disorder, but there are only 700 beds in residential programs to serve this population, according to the state Correctional Association report, based on visits to 14 state prisons and interviews with inmates in 2002 and 2003.

The group's monitors found instances in which mentally ill prisoners were mistreated or kept in near-total solitary confinement for disciplinary reasons. They also noted staffing shortages and a lack of adequate programs like vocational training and GED classes, said Robert Gangi, the association's executive director.

"We continue to have serious concerns relating to inadequate conditions, and, in some cases, inhumane conditions, for mentally ill prisoners," he said.

The association determined mentally ill inmates who had a spot in the prison system's separate care facilities were generally satisfied with their treatment. But even with the additional revenue added to expand those facilities, Gangi said, a "large gap" will remain between those who need services and what is provided.

Last year, the state increased funding for the treatment of mentally ill prisoners, adding \$12 million to the state Department of Correctional Services budget and using \$7 million from the Office of Mental Health, according to the state Budget Division.

The total DOCS and OMH operating budgets for inmate mental health services in the 2005-06 budget is \$113.5 million.

Programs and beds funded by the new money are just starting to come online, Gangi said, and have not yet been evaluated by the Correctional Association.

The report details inmate treatment in occasionally horrific detail. Monitors reported seeing prisoners in the Special Housing Units (disciplinary cells called "the box") who

had "smeared feces on their bodies," "cut their own flesh," paced around their cells like caged animals," or "rambled incoherently."

Correctional Services Department spokesman James Flateau said the report isn't "worthy of a response."

"It is well-known that this is a lobbying group for inmates," he said. "Its inmate bias shows as it masks opinions as facts."

The Correctional Association got the right to monitor prisons in 1846 from the state Legislature. Assemblyman Jeffrion Aubry, D-Queens, chairman of the Assembly Corrections Committee, called the report "balanced and helpful."

"Some people think they only criticize," he said. "But where there are things that are positive, they point that out."

Aubry has proposed a bill that would bar placement of mentally ill inmates in solitary confinement, which experts argue worsens their conditions, and establish disciplinary units other than "the box." This year, the measure has support in the GOP-controlled Senate from Sen. Michael Nozzolio, a Seneca County Republican.