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Report: Jails' mental health care poor

BY ZACHARY R. DOWDY

STAFF WRITER

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New York's prisons have too much use of harsh disciplinary measures and not enough mental health care or education programs, according to a report released today by the Correctional Association of New York, a watchdog agency.

But a spokesman for the state Department of Correctional Services said the 163-page report isn't worthy of a response. The state houses 64,000 inmates in 70 prisons around the state.

On the plus side, the report said there are good programs and well-run facilities, though the system has a way to go in key areas.

"Everyone is recognizing that we don't have adequate services for the mentally ill," said Jack Beck, director of the Correctional Association's Prison Visiting Project, which gathered material from 14 prisons for the report. The study relies on visits made in 2002 and 2003, but Beck said recent visits to the prisons show the conditions in the report are current.

The Correctional Association, a nonprofit agency based in Manhattan, was founded in 1844. It was granted authority by the state legislature to visit prisons and report findings to the public and policy makers.

Beck said prison administrators too often place mentally ill prisoners who act violently in segregated special housing units when they could better use treatment, which the report complains is scarce.

It reported that 12 percent, or 7,500 inmates, suffer from mental illness - about half of them diagnosed with a major illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder - with only about 700 beds to accommodate them.

"The disciplinary segregation units are toxic environments for them," Beck said.

Prisoners seeking help from the Correctional Association, which lobbies the Legislature for change, most often cited medical care as their chief complaint. The report documents long waits for care, understaffing and poor treatment of diseases such as hepatitis C. Only half of HIV-positive inmates seek care, and the prison system should do more to encourage others to come forward, the report said.

The report did commend the department, though, for dropping the rate at which inmates

die of AIDS since 1995, saying the ones who do receive treatment get the "most effective medication available."

Even so, James B. Fleteau, the DOCS spokesman, said: "This report is not worthy of a response. It is well known that this is a lobbying group for inmates."

Concerns over medical care have always topped inmates' lists of complaints, but the report said frustrations over idleness are more common in the system, which the report said offers few educational and vocational options. It cited the overuse of "porter," or cleaning jobs in one facility, where 42 men were assigned to one gym.

While the state prison system offers inmates Adult Basic Education and allows inmates to obtain high school equivalency diplomas, inmates often have to wait on long lists for these courses and vocational programs, which lack staffing.

State and federal funding for college-level programs was eliminated in 1995. The report documented 670 inmates taking college courses in 2003 at private colleges.

"So when they return to a community, they are not in a position to get a job, keep a job and become productive citizens," Beck said. "The likelihood of them committing a crime again increases."

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