

The Correctional Association of New York

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NEWS RELEASE

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The Correctional Association Releases Extensive Report on New York's Prison System

Treatment of Inmates with Mental Illness, Conditions in Solitary Confinement and Lack of Academic and Vocational Programs Criticized

The Correctional Association of New York (CA) has published a report on the State prison system: *State of the Prisons 2002-2003: Conditions of Confinement in 14 New York State Correctional Facilities*. The report includes detailed accounts on 14 individual prison monitoring visits in 2002 and 2003 as well as an extensive overview section that identifies systemic trends and problems and offers recommendations for improvements.

The report concludes that although there are some model programs and well-run facilities in the state prison system, there are many troubling problems that require state policymakers' attention. Specifically, the system fails to meet the needs of the majority of inmates with mental illness; disciplinary confinement is overused, harsh and sometimes ineffective; and, there are too few programs in which inmates can learn and engage in constructive activities. (The report notes that some specific practices, personnel and conditions may have changed since the time of the individual visits in 2002 and 2003.)

Approximately 7,500 or 11% of New York State inmates suffer from mental illness, and about half of them have a major mental disorder, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. While residential programs exist that provide effective treatment for inmates with mental illness, they have a capacity of just over 700 beds, providing services to only a fraction of the inmates who can benefit from them. According to Executive Director Robert Gangi, "For most inmates with mental illness, services are woefully inadequate and life in state confinement is all too often a harrowing and hazardous experience."

The report finds that in New York's prisons, inmates with mental illness struggle with victimization by staff and other inmates, have difficulties complying with their medication regimens, and frequently violate prison rules as a result of their mental illness. Moreover, correction officers lack the training needed to work effectively with inmates with mental illness and vacancies in mental health staff cause serious gaps in services. Whereas residential treatment programs can provide a supportive environment that facilitates treatment compliance and minimizes conflicts, the capacity of these programs needs to be significantly expanded to meet the real needs of the current prison population.

New York vastly overuses disciplinary segregation, in which inmates are locked up for 23 hours a day with minimal human contact, little natural light and chronic, enforced idleness.

Approximately 4,400 inmates or 7% of New York's prison population are confined in Special Housing Units (SHUs), a higher number and percentage of inmates than any other state. Although some SHUs maintain positive environments and provide some in-cell programs, serious problems remain with this type of detention. Rates of suicide and self harm are high, SHU sentences can be excessively long – sometimes for many years – and punishment regimens can be exceptionally harsh.

According to the CA report, almost 20% of the inmates in disciplinary confinement suffer from mental illness. This environment of isolation and punishment is challenging for any individual, but for inmates with mental illness, the SHU can be truly toxic, leading them to mentally decompensate. Mr. Gangi recalls a particularly distressing interview with an inmate in a SHU: “He showed me his wrists and arms, which had scars from several acts of self harm and suicide attempts. It was painfully obvious that the man needed extensive treatment; instead, he would spend many more years in the SHU.” The report recommends removing inmates with serious mental illness from SHUs and placing them in residential treatment programs; reducing the use of disciplinary confinement; enhancing opportunities for prisoners in lockdown units; and, increasing oversight of SHUs to prevent abuse and self-harm.

A problem that the report identified at nearly every prison visited by CA representatives was the insufficient number of meaningful programs. Waiting lists for educational, vocational and treatment programs were uniformly long, staff vacancies caused the unnecessary suspension of courses, and materials and equipment were often outdated. Moreover, inmates throughout the system stated that one of the major changes they would like to see in their prisons is the addition of more programs. According to the Department of Correctional Services, approximately 52% of inmates have no GED or high school diploma, and the system does not have sufficient space in classes to enroll them. Research confirms that the more education an individual receives while incarcerated, the more likely he or she is to be successful and to avoid recidivism upon release. As Jack Beck, Director of the CA's Prison Visiting Project, states, “New York State has a great opportunity to provide individuals with a proven key to success upon release from prison, but regularly fails to ensure that these services are available to the many inmates who need them.”

More than 95% of New York's inmates return to their communities, but 40% of inmates are re-incarcerated within three years after their release. Providing treatment for inmates with mental illness, instituting effective methods of working with inmates who commit disciplinary infractions and creating extensive opportunities for constructive activities is not simply humane; it saves money, reduces recidivism and creates more safe prison environments. According to Mr. Beck, “When individuals can gain valuable skills and access to needed treatment, thereby addressing the problems that have brought them into the prison system, they are far more likely to have positive interactions with prison staff and to find success upon release. Effective prison programs will enable inmates to be released sooner and help them avoid re-incarceration, reducing the prison population and saving the state a significant amount of money in prison costs.”

In 1846, the New York State Legislature passed a law granting the Correctional Association the authority to enter and monitor New York State prisons and report its findings to policymakers and the public. This special legislative privilege – only one other private organization in America has anything similar – remains in place nearly 160 years later, allowing the CA to observe, first hand, conditions inside the walls. The Prison Visiting Project is the arm of the Correctional Association that fills this oversight role and advocates for policies that will better serve inmates, prison staff and society.

A copy of the full report is available upon request.