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State budget problems? Close more prisons

System still has 5,000 unused beds, and fewer inmates won't hurt public safety

BY ROBERT GANGI

Gov. David A. Paterson has proposed severe spending reductions to close New York's projected \$3 billion deficit for this fiscal year. Aid for public schools, Medicaid and other health and mental health programs, libraries, summer special education programs, and HIV-AIDS services are poised to take big hits.

Another place in the state's budget is primed for cutting: prisons.

New York's prison population has declined by more than 12,000 people in the past 10 years, dropping to about 59,100 today. The state's crime rate also declined precipitously during that time.

But, largely for political rea-

sons, the state did not close any correctional facilities during most of those years. Spending on prisons actually increased over that time, even as the number of people in prison fell. It wasn't until earlier this year, confronted with the current fiscal crisis, that Albany policy-makers managed to muster the will to shut down about 2,250 prison beds, at a savings of \$52 million over two years.

The state's prison system still has more than 5,000 unused spaces. With state government in such desperate need of economies and with the evidence that having fewer inmates doesn't threaten public safety, it's time to close underutilized prisons.

State leaders can enact additional measures that will reduce the prison population and make

the cost-savings step of shutting facilities easier to take:

■ **Full Rockefeller drug laws repeal:** Even after reforms were enacted earlier this year, mandatory sentencing provisions remain on the books that will cause the imprisonment of thousands of minor drug offenders each year.

■ **Expand work release:** In 1994, more than 27,000 state inmates participated in this proven and cost beneficial program, which aids incarcerated people in their safe transition back to the community. Now, only about 2,500 are enrolled.

■ **Expand graduated sanctions for technical parole violations:** Last year, more than 9,000 people were returned to state prison for technical parole violations — like showing up late for an appointment or breaking curfew — not for committing new crimes. Instead of returning people to prison, the state could step up their level of supervision.

■ **Increase parole release and ex-**

pand merit time eligibility: The state's Parole Board often denies individuals release due to the nature of their crime, despite their positive institutional records, and merit time, which allows inmates to earn time off their sentences, isn't available to those convicted of violent offenses. Combined, these two policies delay the release of thousands of people every year.

When New York State passed the Rockefeller drug laws in 1973, only about 12,500 people were confined in its prisons. About 300,000 people were locked up across the nation. Those harsh laws effectively triggered a mandatory sentencing movement that swept the country. Today our nation's correctional facilities house nearly 2.4 million people, a growth of more than 600 percent.

New York can now address its budget woes while performing a pivotal role in pointing criminal justice practice in a more con-

structive direction. At a press conference this past spring, Paterson seemed to support this point of view when he said: "Sometimes I wonder what planet I'm living on when I'm in here defending closing prisons. You know when you close prisons? When there aren't enough prisoners to fill them up."

We look to the governor and legislative leaders to exercise leadership that continues New York's emphasis on progressive measures that reduce resources for incarceration and save the state money, while favoring approaches that actually cut recidivism rates and restore the well-being of our people and communities. That's the planet we would all prefer to live on.



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