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LEGISLATIVE GAZETTE

State consolidating inmate housing at 17 prisons

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Gov. David A. Paterson and state Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Brian Fischer announced last week that housing units deemed underutilized at more than a dozen state prisons will be temporarily consolidated in coming weeks.

Inmates from the 22 units at 17 prisons will be transferred to other units, and corrections officers previously assigned to the units will be reassigned to other units within the same facility. By consolidating the units, 149 staff positions will be left temporarily unfilled, which DOCS projects will save the state \$8.4 million a year, not counting benefits.

The consolidations and staff vacancies may be a cost-saving measure to the state, but they come at the expense of the safety of inmates, staff and the prisons' surrounding communities, argues Chris Leo, legislative director for the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association.

According to DOCS, the consolidations are a result of a declining prison population, which has decreased by almost 20 percent in the past decade and by almost 4 percent last year alone.

In the current fiscal year, according to the 2010-2011 Executive Budget, the number of inmates is projected to decrease by 1,100 inmates and next fiscal year by an additional 1,000.

Eric Kriss, spokesman for DOCS, said this can be attributed to the Rockefeller-era drug law reforms included in the budget last year, the implementation of early release programs such as the Merit Time program and a declining crime rate. In the past decade, DOCS estimates the state crime rate has dropped by more than 30 percent.

Leo agrees that the prison population has declined in the past decade, but maintains that the decline just means that prisons had been operating at 130 percent capacity and now they are operating at 101 percent capacity.

"They're not looking to close these facilities, they're just consolidating, so as to not cut administrative positions. They're putting officers and inmates in jeopardy," he said.

Kriss said the consolidations are labeled temporary because in the proposed budget, four prisons are slated for closure, and there may be a need to reopen some vacated units to house inmates displaced during future prison closings.

Robert Gangi, executive director of the inmate rights organization Correctional Association of New York, said of the actions, "We're pleased. We think this is a positive step in the right direction, but at the same time we urge the state to make this a permanent effect rather than temporary. There's no reason for the state to hedge its

bets."

Leo said the consolidations and vacant staff positions might be labeled as temporary, but really represent permanent unit closures and staff vacancies in an already understaffed system. "They always say they're temporary, but trust me, they're permanent," he said.

DOCS also announced that in coming months, a protective custody unit in a gymnasium at Collins Correctional Facility in Erie County that is considered underused would be returned to use as a gymnasium, with 110 inmates transferred to other protective custody units.

"Double-bunked cells, prisoners living in gyms, if [underutilization] is the case, why were these inmates in a gym in the first place? There's mismanagement," said Leo.