

# The New York Times

## Plan to Close Prisons Stirs Anxiety in Rural Towns

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GABRIELS, N.Y. — After 17 years of marriage, Joy and Richard Gonyea managed to save enough to trade their trailer in November for a cozy prefabricated home with a room for each of their two children and a pool in the backyard. The home overlooks the pine trees on the edge of their two-acre property in rural Vermontville, eight miles from the secluded state prison where Mrs. Gonyea works.

“This home is all we’ve ever dreamed of,” said Mrs. Gonyea, 43, a registered nurse who runs the medical department at the prison, Camp Gabriels, a minimum-security facility in this minuscule hamlet in Franklin County, at the northern end of Adirondack Park.

“This,” she said, “is the place we always wanted to have for our kids.”

Then she began to cry.

On Jan. 11, the Spitzer administration announced plans to close Camp Gabriels, two other corrections camps and a medium-security prison, all of which have been operating below capacity since 1996 because of a decline in the number of nonviolent felons, the state’s corrections commissioner, Brian Fischer, said.

Closing those prisons, Mr. Fischer said, would save the state millions of dollars, free up money for the treatment of sex offenders and mentally ill inmates, and finance programs like anger management and vocational training, meant to prepare prisoners for their release.

But for Mrs. Gonyea, her neighbors and co-workers, the prospect of losing Camp Gabriels has stoked fear and doubt — about their future and about the future of their communities, which have come to depend on the prison over the years to survive.

As rural economies across the country crumbled in the 1980s and the population of prison inmates swelled, largely because of tougher drug laws, states pushed prison construction as an economic escape route of sorts. Throughout the 1960s and ’70s, an average of four prisons were built each year in rural America; the rate quadrupled in the 1980s and

reached 24 a year in the 1990s, according to the federal Agriculture Department's economic research service.

The boom, experts say, provided employment, but it also fostered a cycle of dependency. Depressed rural communities came to rely on the prisons as a source of jobs, economic sustenance and services, with little effort devoted to attracting other viable businesses.

“What we've seen in New York and other states is that one prison led to another prison and led to another prison, creating the notion that there's no other economic development option than to build prisons to foster stability in rural areas,” said Tracy Huling, an independent consultant in New York who has done extensive research on the role of prisons in rural economies.

None of the 584 workers at Camp Gabriels and the other prisons slated to close — Camp McGregor in Saratoga County, Camp Pharsalia in Chenango County and the Hudson Correctional Facility in Columbia County — are expected to lose their jobs; state and union officials have said the workers will be able to transfer to other prisons.

But when that will happen, where the new jobs will be or even whether there will be jobs for everyone, are bound to remain open questions for months to come.

The uncertainty has gnawed on residents here and in several other communities in this remote, challenging region where below-zero temperatures are the norm this time of year. The correction industry is big business in Franklin County, which has five state prisons and one federal prison in its 1,678 sparsely populated square miles. In the town of Brighton, which encompasses Gabriels and five other hamlets, the prison is perhaps the only place where someone with a high school diploma can earn a decent wage and benefits.

“There ain't much else the local people could do for gainful employment,” said Peter Martin, 48, the town's supervisor and a corrections officer at Camp Gabriels for 22 years.

The camp employs 136 people, including 85 corrections officers.

The reliance on Camp Gabriels extends well beyond jobs. Small businesses have staked their survival on the prison workers who patronize their stores. Local governments and charities, meanwhile, have come to depend on inmate work crews to clear snow from fire hydrants, maintain parks and hiking trails, mow the lawns at cemeteries and unload trucks at food pantries.

Every winter, the crews help build an ice palace in the nearby village of Saranac Lake, cutting thick blocks of ice that can weigh up to 700 pounds. The palace is the main attraction of the village's Winter Carnival and attracts thousands to the area.

“All those services, when you put that into dollars, there's no way we'd be able to hire people to perform them,” said Mary Ellen Keith, supervisor of the town of Franklin,

which relies on the crews to cut overgrown brush from the sides of 67 miles of local roads, among other tasks. (Franklin is just south of Brighton and another of the 19 towns that make up Franklin County.)

Four of Mrs. Keith's nine children work in state prisons, she said, including a son and a daughter at Camp Gabriels.

"Everyone around here either works in the prisons, or has a relative who works in the prisons, or knows someone who works in the prisons," said Mrs. Keith, 78. "My kids were able to build their homes and raise their families here because of the prisons. If it weren't for the prisons, they would have had to leave the area."

Prisons are also a valuable political tool, because inmates are counted as local residents, allowing communities to receive more state and federal aid for emergency services. Mr. Martin said that he was not yet sure how the town of Brighton stood to lose if Camp Gabriels closed, but he added, "We're concerned about losing any kind of aid here."

Inmate-inclusive population counts are also used when drawing legislative and Congressional district lines.

Franklin County has struggled to find its economic footing. The terrain is carved by mountains, streams and lakes, with limited farmland. Much of it falls inside Adirondack Park, so development must abide by strict rules. Tourism is strong, but concentrated in a few areas. Winters are long and the wind so cold it seems to slice the skin, like tiny razor blades. The soil is frozen for most of the year; the growing season lasts from May through September, yielding potatoes and some grain crops, but little else.

In Gabriels, which has about 800 residents, including the prison's 186 inmates, the closest thing to Main Street is a half-mile stretch of state highway, Route 86. It has two mini-markets, two farms, a general store, a cafe, a temporary post office (the permanent one burned last winter) and a few dozen homes. Camp Gabriels is set back from the highway, shrouded by tall pines.

The camp opened in 1982, in a building once occupied by a sanitarium. It has no fences; trees delimit its perimeter. At its peak, it held 336 inmates.

"There's no doubt that closing prisons could bring short-term economic distress to some areas, but the question is, is that a justification for refusing to make changes? The answer should be no," said Edmund J. McMahon, director of the Empire Center for New York State Policy, a conservative group. "There should be other ways of improving the economic situation in upstate New York that doesn't involve filling upstate New York with prisons."

Gov. George E. Pataki tried to close prisons in New York each fiscal year from 2002 to 2006, but he faced intense pressure from upstate legislators and union leaders, who are already objecting to Gov. Eliot Spitzer's proposal.

This is Mr. Spitzer's first try to close prisons and, officials say, it is a necessary step to help the state bridge a projected \$4.4 billion budget gap and adapt its corrections system to the number and types of inmates it now serves. The closings, scheduled for January 2009, would save the state more than \$40 million in operating costs over the next two years and \$30 million over five years in repair costs.

"This is as much a budget issue as it is a management issue," Mr. Fischer, the corrections commissioner, said in an interview. "I've got a finite budget and I've got a finite work force, and I have to use them where my needs are, and that's in the larger facilities."

The number of inmates housed in the state's maximum-security prisons increased by 18 percent from 1996 to 2007, while the inmate population in medium-security prisons declined by the same rate. During that period, the number of prisoners in minimum-security facilities — most convicted of larceny, burglary, minor drug possession and other nonviolent crimes — decreased by 47 percent, officials said.

Six months before closing Camp Gabriels and the other prisons, the state must detail what it plans to do with the emptied facilities. Mr. Fischer said that it was too early to tell what those plans would be, but that the state would consider public and private uses for the properties.

Union leaders and many Camp Gabriels workers said they would not give in easily, though. They organized a rally in Saranac Lake on Thursday and a letter-writing campaign, hoping to convince state legislators that the prison was worth saving.

"I told my wife we should hang in there," said Mr. Gonyea, 44, who retired in 2005 after working for 23 years as a corrections officer, 17 of those at Camp Gabriels. "The anxiety, all this doubt, it's killing us. But it's not over yet."