

## **Attica prisoners still face threats to safety, health**

By Jack Beck

(September 14, 2006) — Thirty-five years ago, egregious prison conditions and inhumane treatment of Attica's inmates precipitated its infamous prison uprising. The government's violent response resulted in 39 deaths. The Correctional Association of New York, a 162-year-old organization with statutory authority to inspect state prisons, is in a unique position to assess whether conditions have improved since this tragedy. We regularly visit Attica, speak with staff and inmates, and report on conditions.

Since 1971, the state has made some progress in enhancing communication between inmates and staff and in providing services and rehabilitative programs. Now, an elected Inmate Liaison Committee regularly meets with the prison administration. The prison has improved food services, is providing religious diets, has created or enhanced educational, vocational and substance abuse treatment programs, and has augmented staff providing medical and mental health care.

Over this time, however, the state prison system has expanded more than fivefold, from 12,500 inmates to 63,000, and staffing levels and rehabilitative services have not kept pace. Today, too many inmates are still not engaged in programs. Complaints of inadequate medical care are commonplace. Prisons, including Attica, now confine significantly more inmates with mental illness, who often experience difficulties coping with prison due to their illness.

Most disturbing is the continuing staff mistreatment of Attica inmates. Based upon our recent survey of more than 1,000 inmates in 12 prisons, staff abuse at Attica is among the worst we have seen. Nearly a quarter of the inmates we surveyed reported having a physical confrontation with staff and more than 60 percent stated they experienced verbal harassment by staff. More than one-third of the inmates reported retaliation for filing complaints, having their lights or water turned off in their cells, or their property destroyed. It seems that force and intimidation are routinely used to control the population. Although actual staff and inmate violence has diminished at Attica during the past decade, mistrust between staff and inmates still permeates the facility. With more than 80 percent of the prison population being African American or Latino, and with very few staff of color, the inevitable racial tension impedes effective communication.

Although the ghosts of Attica's uprising and aftermath remain, they should not forever haunt the present. Other prisons in New York have less tension, better inmate-staff communication and greater respect between staff and inmates, all resulting in much less violence and abuse.

To improve Attica, there must be more active leadership from the new executive team of the corrections department that will be appointed by the next governor, an evolution in the way staff and inmates interact, effective counseling and discipline for inmates and staff who refuse to accept change, and increased monitoring of prison violence through cameras and the department's investigative unit. With these improvements and inmates more engaged in meaningful activities, Attica would be safer and its inmates would be more successful when they are released. Unfortunately, the prison still has a long way to go to reach these goals.

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