



## Prison criticized for inmate treatment

**Independent group says Cossackie Correctional inmates subjected to harassment, retaliation from staff**

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COXSACKIE — A recently published report from an independent prison watchdog says inmates at the maximum-security Cossackie Correctional Facility complain that staff retaliate against those who file grievances and that physical confrontations and verbal harassment occur frequently.

The report by the Correctional Association of New York, a nonprofit group that visits prisons and reports its findings and recommendations to the state Legislature, was conducted over two days in May 2010.

The group surveyed 345 inmates, including those in general population, solitary confinement, the prison's alcohol and substance abuse program and 60-bed Regional Medical Unit.

“Our most serious concern was the high level of tension between staff and inmates in general population, the Regional Medical Unit and the (Special Housing Unit), resulting in many inmates feeling unsafe in the prison,” the report concluded. “Survey participants and inmates with whom we spoke repeatedly asserted that they were verbally harassed by staff and were retaliated against if they filed complaints about staff conduct.”

It added: “Some reported physical abuse by staff and others asserted they received false misbehavior reports.”

Sixty-two percent classified inmate-staff relations as very bad, while less said it was somewhat bad. Less than 4 percent said the relationship was good or somewhat good.

That is “substantially worse” than most of the 27 prisons that the Correctional Association has comparable data for, the report said.

Just over half of the inmates said they felt very unsafe, the fourth highest rate among the prisons surveyed by the association.

“Overall, the information contained in the inmate surveys strongly suggests there is a significant problem at the prison with staff-inmate interactions,” the report said.

More than 80 percent of inmates surveyed reported either very frequent or frequent physical confrontations between inmates and staff, although only 16 percent said they personally had a confrontation — a lower rate than most prisons.

“Clearly, Coxsackie inmates have significant concerns about the level of inmates-staff violence, even if the prison might not have the highest rates for such incidents,” the report said.

An analysis of DOCS data showed assaults on staff from 2007 through 2009 placed Coxsackie in the top third of maximum-security prisons for such incidents.

Twenty-two assaults occurred from October 2009 to October 2010, a rate consistent with the prior three years, the report said.

Verbal assaults are also prevalent, according to the report.

Nearly 90 percent of inmates said verbal harassment from staff was either very frequent or frequent — one of the worst rates among the surveyed prisons.

Eighty-three percent said they personally experienced verbal harassment.

Three-quarters of inmates said staff were also involved in misconduct.

They were pessimistic about the grievance process; 80 percent who’ve used the system viewed it as poor.

More than half of those who filed a complaint said staff retaliated against them at least once for doing so.

In 2009, 858 grievances were filed, a slight increase from the year before. Thirty-two percent of the grievances were for staff conduct.

“We are concerned by the high percentage of grievances involving staff conduct,” the report said.

Prison Superintendent Daniel Martuscello didn’t return a call for comment Wednesday.

His office said it’s normally policy to forward questions to the DOCS central office in Albany.

DOCS spokeswoman Linda Foglia didn’t return a call for comment.

The association’s findings will not affect how staff do their jobs, according to one corrections officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they’re not allowed to speak about the

report.

“They’re not blatantly lying,” the officer said of the inmates. But, the officer said, it’s important to remember that “you’re going to have some disgruntled individuals.”

There were positive findings in the report.

“We found high levels of satisfaction among inmates in some of the academic and most vocational programs,” the report said.

The prison also scored better than others in satisfaction with medical and food services.

The 30-page report relied not only on surveys, but also written correspondence with inmates, data supplied by the prison and conversations with the superintendent and others.

Coxsackie Correctional was built in 1935.

At the time of the Correctional Association’s visit — the first since 2004 — the facility housed 1,029 inmates, 969 of whom were in general population.

Most — 63 percent — hail from New York City and surrounding suburbs. More than half are black, while 24 percent are Hispanic and less are Caucasian.

The median age is 34.

Forty-three percent face their earliest release date within four years. The vast majority — 77 percent — were convicted of a violent crime. Only 13 percent were convicted of a drug-related crime.

Eighty-two percent were identified by DOCS as having a history of substance abuse.

The report is available online at [www.correctionalassociation.org/publications/reports.htm](http://www.correctionalassociation.org/publications/reports.htm). To reach reporter Doron Tyler Antrim call 518-943-2100 ext. 3323 or email [dantrim@thedailymail.net](mailto:dantrim@thedailymail.net).