

DOCS expands Shock Incarceration Program

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Mon, Aug 24, 2009

A recent expansion of the Shock Incarceration Program will

benefit inmates and the state, said Brian Fischer, commissioner of the Department of Correctional Services.

“The expansion of shock incarceration marks a significant milestone in New York’s successful efforts to reduce crime,” Fischer said. “Shock has been one of the most effective strategies in helping the state cut its crime rate 35 percent over the past decade.”

Shock is a program that sends inmates to a six-month, military-style boot camp where inmates do hard labor, perform community service, improve their physical fitness, take classes and get counseling.

Under Rockefeller drug law reforms, which were signed into law by Gov. David A. Paterson in April, shock has been expanded to include inmates from general confinement, inmates under 50 years old and repeat B Felony drug offenders with nonviolent convictions.

Previously, shock incarceration participants had to enter the program at the point of their reception into the prison system, they could not be more than three years from their earliest court-set release date and they had to be under the age of 40.

The expansion in eligibility for the program means more inmates will get a chance to use it as a tool to turn their lives around.

One of the most important changes is allowing inmates with sentences longer than three years to apply for the program. Previously, two inmates could have been convicted of the same crime, with one given a three-year sentence and the other receiving four years. The inmate with the longer sentence would not have been able to enter the program.

“At some point, when they hit the three-year point before their release, should we not consider them [for Shock Incarceration]?” Fischer asked.

Historically, the older an inmate is, the less likely they are to reenter prison, so extending the age limit makes sense, the commissioner said.

“It gives people who have been denied because of age another shot,” Fischer said. “Age is not a factor like it used to be. Forty-nine is not old anymore.”

Allowing certain repeat offenders into the program could help inmates kick drug problems that may have plagued them in the past.

“People fail a couple of times before they get themselves together after drugs,’ Fischer said.

The program can cut up to 30 months of incarceration time at a prison facility per inmate, which translates into money for the state and taxpayers. Since shock incarceration began in 1987, it has saved more than \$1.3 billion by reducing the need for traditional prison space for over 40,000 inmates, according to the Department of Corrections.

The program is one of the primary reasons the number of inmates has decreased by close 11,000, or about 17 percent, since 1999, Fischer said.

In shock facilities, inmates have a very structured day, Fischer said. During the program they receive 675 hours of alcohol and substance abuse therapy, life skills and group counseling. They also spend 12 hours a week taking academic classes. More than 92 percent of shock inmates passed their GED in the year ending June 30, 2008, a



pass rate nearly 35 percent higher than the state's general public.

Shock helps inmates get their mind and bodies healthy so they can move forward with their lives, Fischer said.

"It provides a physical and mental health program that really does work," Fischer said. "It's a treatment program that changes people a lot and it does it very quickly."

Shock helps inmates focus on finding the answers to two key questions in their lives: "How did I get here and what do I need to do to not come back?" Fischer said.

Fischer said he sees a huge change in the inmates from the time they enter shock to when they graduate the program. In addition to improving physical health, he notices a difference in their mental well-being.

"What you see is young men and women who really feel good about themselves," Fischer said. "They know who they are. It's very emotional. It gives them the feeling: 'I can make it in the streets.'"

After leaving the shock incarceration program, inmates receive intensive parole supervision, including frequent drug testing and numerous home visits from parole officers, said Heather Groll, spokeswoman for the state Division of Parole.

Inmates begin to plan their "after-shock" plan before leaving the program.

"They work with parole officers and other staff to determine what kind of assistance they will need once they leave the program so that they do not lose the good momentum and habits that they worked on inside," Groll said. "Once released, they are subject to a more intensive supervision program designed to discourage the type of activity that could result in a return to prison."

Currently, the Department of Corrections operates four shock incarceration facilities that have 1,328 beds available.

Fischer said he hopes more judges will send inmates into the program. He sees a lot of positives in shock incarceration.

"In the end, everybody gets a benefit — the offender, society and taxpayers," Fischer said.