

# **New York prison system opens unit for mentally ill**

By The Associated Press

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ALBANY - The first inmates moved Tuesday into a new state prison unit for disruptive mentally ill prisoners that was created in response to a lawsuit filed by an advocacy group in 2002. The 100-bed Residential Mental Health Unit at Marcy Correctional Facility in Oneida County was designed by the state corrections and mental health agencies under the terms of a 2007 settlement with Disability Advocates.

The nonprofit group sued to improve treatment of mentally ill prisoners and to stop putting inmates with serious mental illness and disciplinary issues in solitary confinement. Inmates in the new unit will receive more mental health care, therapeutic programming and exercise. Of the 58,690 inmates in New York state prisons, 7,844 are diagnosed with mental illness, including 2,359 with serious mental illness, said Erik Kriss, spokesman for the Department of Correctional Services. Inmates designated as seriously mentally ill are those with schizophrenia, delusional disorder, psychotic disorder, major depression and bipolar disorder. The designation also includes suicidal inmates and those driven by psychosis or depression to harm themselves.

About 200 of those with serious mental illness have confinement sanctions for disciplinary violations, Kriss said. Traditionally, such inmates are moved to an S-block, a special housing unit with lockdown cells that reduce the need for security. The lawsuit claimed that prisoners with mental illness did not get adequate treatment, and as a result, many of them were being punished with long sentences of solitary confinement, severe restrictions on property and visits, and no access to out-of-cell programming.

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