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N.Y. needs a prison break: With lower crime, costs should be lowered too -- if unions will allow it

Editorials

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Maisel/News Aerial view of Rikers Island, where less prisoners go every day.

Thanks to plunging crime rates, New York's prison system is far bigger than it needs to be - with one of every eight beds empty.

Gov. Cuomo has called for downsizing and appointed a task force to identify underused

penitentiaries for closure.

But almost any effort to save tax dollars in Albany brings out the crazy talk, and Cuomo's prison plan is no exception.

The rhetorical flamethrower in this case is correction officers union chief Donn Rowe.

According to him, shedding 3,500 beds - less than half the system's excess capacity - would be nothing less than "catastrophic."

Such a move would present "a clear and present danger to our prison system," he hyperventilated. "Sooner or later, the system will break."

Equally alarmist were the statistics he chose to cite - including the misleading assertion that maximum-security prisons are at 122% of capacity.

That figure, cherry-picked from federal reports, accounts for only general-purpose beds. It ignores the reality that, on any given day, thousands of inmates are bunking elsewhere - in disciplinary units, mental health units, infirmary beds or, during court proceedings, local jails - leaving no shortage of unused regular cells.

Here are a few facts Rowe neglected to mention:

The prison population has plunged along with crime, shrinking 21% from its peak in 2000.

During the same period, staffing at the Department of Correctional Services was down just 9%.

And despite previous prison closures and mergers, the penal system is still carrying almost 8,000 empty beds.

Here's the most relevant number of all - the \$10 billion deficit in next year's state budget.

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With a hole that big, Cuomo has no choice but to reduce funding for virtually every state program, including education for children and health care for the poor and disabled. To exempt an oversized prison system from needed cuts would be unconscionable.

The sooner union leaders like Rowe deal realistically with New York's new fiscal realities, the better off everyone will be.

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