



## **Keynote speaker of Attica conference points to a better life for prisoners**

The state official responsible for 95,000 offenders – 57,000 of them behind bars, the rest on probation or parole – culminated UB Law School's three-day conference on the 40th anniversary of the Attica prison riot by reviewing what has changed in New York State's prisons since 1971, and what remains to be done.

Brian Fischer, commissioner of the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, addressed about 70 students, faculty and other conference participants on Sept. 13 in O'Brian Hall.

Introduced by Professor Teresa A. Miller, organizer of the ambitious conference, Fischer used the occasion to review initiatives that have been introduced in the state prison system. Many address deficiencies that became a flashpoint in the 1971 riot, which left 43 persons dead when Gov. Nelson Rockefeller ordered state troopers to retake the prison.

"When new offenders go into the prison system, the idea of going to Attica unnerves them," Fischer said. "The very name inspires fear. Attica has become the benchmark incident that has been identified with what society thought was wrong with the system."

That longtime perception is perhaps unwarranted now, he said, with the implementation of mechanisms by which inmates can air grievances to prison administrators, and programs such as job skills training that can give purpose to inmates' lives.

"Think of me as a pragmatic optimist," Fischer said. "I'm acutely aware of what exists. Yet I work and hope for a better outcome. ... Because prisons are a reflection of society, they are like small towns or communities. Prison life involves the good, the bad and the ugly."

One example of an area in which progress has been made, he said, is in the treatment of mentally ill prisoners. In New York State, Fischer said, 14.5 percent of the offender population has mental health issues, and 2,500 inmates are considered seriously mentally ill. These prisoners now receive specialized treatment in residential units, reviewed monthly by outside experts, that was simply unthinkable in 1971, he said.

Another area is prisoners' access to legal research. Every inmate, he said, now can access legal materials through a computer system called the Secure Offender Network, making it possible for many inmates to research cases simultaneously, rather than compete for law books. In addition, programs are in place to teach all inmates basic computer skills and afford them Internet access.

An increasingly apparent fact of life in prisons, Fischer said, is that the inmate population is aging rapidly. Since 1999, he said, the number of inmates over age 65 has doubled, totaling just over 800 today. This means increased medical costs, as one effect. State prisons now have special units to care for inmates with Alzheimer's disease and other age-related dementia.

Also, Fischer, said, 60 percent of new offenders entering the system are there because they have committed violent crimes – a turnabout from the era of the harsh Rockefeller drug laws, when most new inmates were drug offenders. In addition, he said, about 15 new inmates each year are sentenced to life without parole, a sentence that now applies to 223 New York State inmates.

These factors add up to an increasingly tough environment – one that can take a toll on corrections workers. "To ignore staff needs while providing for offender needs is no better than ignoring offender needs while providing for staff needs," Fischer said. "The staff is provided with critical incident stress management to deal with emotional trauma. We have an Employee Assistance Program as well. All of this is designed to allow staff to feel part of the system and allow them to feel we are as interested in them as we are in everyone else in the system, including the offenders."

Soffiyah Elijah, executive director of the Correctional Association of New York, an advocacy group for prisoners, served as commenter for the keynote address. She praised Fisher for his openness to hearing concerns and responding to them.

"Our primary concern is, what is life like for people behind bars and what will it be like for them when they come home?" Elijah said.

She recognized the progress that has been made in services for mentally ill prisoners and in educational and vocational opportunities. "Wonderful things have happened since Attica," Elijah said, "but I think we would all agree that there needs to be more. It's not about enhancing their ability to get a job when they go home. It's also about enhancing their self-esteem, so families and communities can see them do something they can take pride in. That's something I hope we can make available to every prisoner in New York State."

In addition, she advocated for expanding the use of monitoring cameras in prisons as a way of preventing assaults; introducing e-mail access for prisoners, which she said is available in several federal prisons; prisoner-run programs to develop leadership skills and an ethic of personal responsibility; more treatment programs for sex offenders; and increased access to parole opportunities, particularly for aging prisoners. "There's nothing like seeing two senior citizens, one walking, pushing the other in a wheelchair, in a prison facility," she said. "How many tax dollars are they wasting day after day after day?"