

# Lessons learned from the Attica tragedy

By Brian Fischer

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The recent 40th anniversary of the Attica prison riot brought renewed focus on that tragic event, which led to the deaths of 43 people. The anniversary also brought attention to the current state of prisons.

Discussion focused on the conditions that existed at the time of the riot, its causes and its aftermath.

We must always remember this tragedy, so we never repeat the actions that contributed to it and its violent conclusion.

We must also recognize its legacy, which has led to significant changes in our state's prisons.

Many factors contributed to the riot at Attica and historians, advocates and pundits of every persuasion have dissected, analyzed and theorized about the conditions inside Attica before the riot. But the Attica of today, indeed the overall correctional system in New York, is decidedly different from what existed 40 years ago. For anyone to suggest that significant and substantive changes have not been made throughout the state's prison system simply ignores reality.

That's not to say that challenges don't exist throughout our prisons and that the potential for violence lurks beneath the surface, sometimes erupting as evidenced by two recent fights among offenders in Attica's A Yard.

Prisons by their very nature can be dangerous, unforgiving environments. They in many ways reflect failure: the failure of individuals to function properly within a structured society and the failure of society to properly account for the conditions that sometimes support and contribute to criminal behavior.

Still, the widespread availability of educational, vocational and therapeutic programs has clearly provided opportunities for rehabilitation and successful re-entry into society, opportunities that did not exist in the pre-Attica riot era, the absence of which may very well have contributed to the riot.

Our department's mission statement summarizes very succinctly what our role is in caring and supervising all of the sentenced offenders we receive every day: to improve public safety by providing a continuity of appropriate treatment services in safe and secure facilities where offenders' needs are addressed and they are prepared for release, followed by supportive services under community supervision to facilitate a successful completion of their sentence.

Despite the fact that offenders are often forgotten or ignored by society, the vast majority of them inevitably return to the community. Our program success has resulted in the early release of more than 100,000 mostly non-violent offenders since 1987. The post-Attica corrections environment in our state has seen the introduction of programs, either statutorily or voluntarily, that have clearly made life in prison more rehabilitative, supportive and oriented toward re-entry.

We will never be completely successful; what organization is? But our efforts are reinforced with the knowledge that our latest recidivism rate for new crimes (11 percent) is the lowest since 1985, while more and more offenders are earning their GED (2,200 in 2010) and privately funded college programs help offenders earn associate's and bachelor's degrees (more than 1,000 participated in college-level programs in 2010).

To those who question the humane treatment of our offenders, consider that the New York state prison system now operates five regional medical units that provide short-term care, while Walsh Medical Center offers long-term medical services. In fact, we run the nation's only unit for cognitively impaired offenders suffering from Alzheimer's or other dementia. Our nursery program at Bedford Hills allows mothers to care for their newborn

children up to 12 to 18 months. None of these programs or operations were remotely considered in the Attica riot era.

Perhaps the most important programs that grew directly out of the Attica riot are the inmate grievance program and the inmate liaison committee program.

These are valuable tools that encourage better communication between offenders and superintendents. Given the unique nature of a prison setting, we are aware of the inherent conflicts between staff and offenders, but, taking an important lesson learned from the Attica riot, we respond to and investigate every complaint or allegation.

I don't highlight these initiatives to justify the system. For me, they are proof that, despite the Attica tragedy, our system continues to evolve, adapt and do what is right within a very difficult environment.