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NY shutters 7 prisons, moves inmates and staff

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — The state recently closed the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility on Staten Island, the seventh prison, camp or work release facility shuttered in 2011 as New York transferred about 2,600 inmates and 1,400 staff to its 60 remaining penal units in an effort to save millions of dollars and remove excess capacity.

As the inmate population dropped to about 56,000 currently, continuing a decade-long decline, the Cuomo administration this summer closed two other medium-security prisons, Mid-Orange in the lower Hudson Valley and Oneida in central New York.

Four minimum-security facilities were also shut: Buffalo Work Release in Erie County, Camp Georgetown in Madison County, Summit Shock in Schoharie County and Fulton Work Release in the Bronx.

"It was a herculean process," said Peter Cutler, spokesman for the Department of Correctional Services. Within a few months, 2,664 inmates were moved, while many staff members were reassigned based on seniority and "bumping" under union contract terms, he said.

"Some people did retire and there were some layoffs," Cutler said. The recently consolidated corrections and parole department had 30,902 personnel, including 18,454 corrections officers, before the closings were announced June 30. That compared with 29,780 staff, including 17,996 corrections officers, by late December.

Data show 1,427 of the 1,706 staff at the seven facilities transferred within the department, 131 were laid off, 95 retired, 22 went to other agencies and some resigned.

The union representing prison guards, which in June said it was disappointed by the largest prison cuts in state history and that any closing would jeopardize safety and the integrity of the system, declined to comment last week.

"There were no incidents whatsoever in terms of any kind of misbehavior or assaults on staff or inmates," Cutler said. He noted that the transition included moving the Department of Motor Vehicles call center, staffed by 55 inmates at Arthur Kill, to Greene Correctional in Coxsackie along with most of those inmates.

New York's prison population had declined from about 71,600 in 1999 to 56,024 on Dec. 30. Gov. Andrew Cuomo said the seven closings were intended to eliminate approximately 3,800 unused prison beds and save the state \$72 million this fiscal year and \$112 million the next. He said the system was inefficient and costly, and communities that lost prisons would be able to request economic development assistance from a \$50 million state fund as well as additional tax credits.

Budget Division spokesman Morris Peters said Friday those savings estimates appear to be on track.

The inmate decline followed a 25 percent statewide drop in crime over the past decade and revisions in sentencing laws that allowed earlier releases and alternative programs for nonviolent drug offenders. The number

of prisoners in medium-security prisons declined almost 20 percent from 2001 to 2010 while those in minimum-security facilities dropped 57 percent.

The Correctional Association, an advocacy group, applauded the closings, urging Cuomo and legislative leaders to reinvest savings in community-based alternatives and vocational and rehabilitation programs to help inmates rejoin communities.

Maximum-security inmate populations declined only 2 percent in a decade, to 24,822 last year. The closings included no maximum-security prisons, despite speculation that Ossining's Sing Sing, along the Amtrak and commuter tracks in the lower Hudson Valley, provided a lucrative sales option.

Now the state has seven more properties potentially for sale, along with Camp Gabriels in the Adirondacks, which was closed two years ago but has failed so far to attract a buyer at two auctions. That 92-acre property 15 miles northwest of Lake Placid includes 48 buildings. The site began as a tuberculosis sanitarium in the early 20th century.

Empire State Development, the state agency responsible for marketing the seven properties, also administers the capital grant and tax credit programs. Spokesman Austin Shafran said the state, through a public and competitive process, would like to test the market for reuse options within the next few months.

Shafran said that as a general policy the department doesn't discuss ongoing negotiations, but it anticipates "a very robust response" to transforming the three downstate properties "into key economic drivers."

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