

DOCCS concerned about staff and inmate safety

Recently, an incident at the NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision's Bare Hill Correctional Facility highlighted the potentially dangerous and challenging work conditions faced by our staff in any of our facilities, no matter the security level.

An assault on any of our staff is reprehensible and anyone responsible for such behavior is disciplined to the fullest extent possible according to the rules and regulations of our Department. We also cooperate fully with our outside law enforcement partners, who may bring charges against the alleged assailant and ultimately refer those charges to the District Attorney for criminal prosecution.

This is our Department's standard procedure, ensuring that such incidents are kept to a minimum, while reminding all sides in the equation that the maintenance of the safety and security of everyone in a DOCCS facility, whether inmate or staff, is our top priority.

This episode presents an opportunity to update the public on important issues that affect public safety, our employees and the inmates in our custody.

DOCCS is responsible for the care, custody, and treatment of individuals sentenced to state prison, working with these inmates to ensure successful re-entry into the community and supervising those who are placed on parole. That's our Department's mission and it's the guide we follow to carry out the very serious responsibility entrusted to us.

In carrying out that responsibility, it's important to recognize how much the state's corrections system has changed.

Since 1999, the state's highest year ever for inmates in our custody (71,472), our inmate population has declined to 55,863 as of March 8, 2012 - that's a 22 percent decline in our entire prison population. During that same time, our security staff has declined from 22,112 in 1999 to 19,383, or a 12 percent drop through the end of Febru-



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ary 2012.

Last year, due to excess capacity, we closed three medium security prisons and four minimum security prisons. This closure process took place over six months and I'm proud to say that because of the great professionalism and dedication of our employees, 2,664 inmates were transferred to other facilities throughout our system without incident. This was no easy task and it required significant planning and very precise logistics. And while the closure of those seven facilities will save the state, and, in turn, taxpayers millions of dollars of annual operational and capital costs, of the 1,115 affected security staff, 1,016 transferred to other facilities within the DOCCS system. In other words, of all the security personnel at those seven closed prisons, only 9 percent left the DOCCS workforce and still we removed 3,800 excess beds from our system.

It's important to underscore these facts because the public has the right to know how we manage our prison system. Therefore, it's equally important to emphasize that with these closures we have never sacrificed the safety and security of our facilities. Contrary to some recent assertions, we have maintained capacity throughout all of the Department's facilities, notably we have 24,039 inmates housed in maximum security facilities and we have a capacity of 25,598 beds. Quite simply, we are not over capacity in any of our prisons.

Just as importantly, we constantly maintain and update our security personnel's

training to ensure the safest possible conditions throughout our prisons. But life in any prison can be challenging and dangerous. We recognize that fact, which is why it's necessary to impose disciplinary sanctions on any inmate who violates our rules and regulations, and we act swiftly and decisively against any offense, especially assaults on our staff.

We take each assault - whether on staff or on other inmates - very seriously and while we abhor any assault, we are pleased that 2011 represented the lowest number of inmate-on-staff assaults in four years (563 in 2011 vs. 580 in 2008), while inmate-on-inmate assaults also declined to 666 in 2011 from 677 in 2010. Again, it's because of the professionalism, training, dedication and constant vigilance of our employees that we are able to achieve such outcomes.

So far this year, inmate-on-staff assaults have declined 40.5 percent versus the same period in 2011 - 63 inmate-on-staff assaults in 2012; 106 inmate-on-staff assaults in 2011.

As I mentioned earlier, the state's prison system has changed greatly. With new sentencing guidelines, the reformation of the Rockefeller Drug Laws and the state-wide decrease in crime, the population of our prison system has changed significantly. Non-violent drug offenders have decreased dramatically in DOCCS prisons. We now manage 60 facilities, including 15 facilities in the North Country and, as of last April, DOCCS now includes the community supervision (or parole) aspect of the state's corrections system. DOCCS is a dynamic agency that houses a unique and potentially dangerous population, which requires us to establish and strictly follow policies and procedures designed to maintain safe and secure facilities, while also protecting the public. We are committed to upholding the standards of safety that protect the staff and inmates within our facilities and the public that lives "outside the wall."

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