



Growing old behind bars: Aging prison population strains system

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The New York corrections department hasn't broken down its health care spending by age, but it spends about \$113,791 annually per inmate in Walsh, which has a substantially disproportionate number of older patients. Average annual health care spending per inmate is \$5,996.

It's hard to gauge the full impact of those costs, though, because while the prison population has been aging, it's also been getting smaller. The number of inmates fell 21.4 percent between 2000 and 2011, which also affected the \$326 million prison health care budget this fiscal year.

Regional medical units

Walsh opened in 1993 – at the height of the prison AIDS crisis – when dying patients filled about 80 percent of its beds, said Judi Antonsen, Walsh's director of nursing.

It was the first regional medical unit – the other four opened between 1996 and 2000. Today, AIDS patients probably fill less than 10 percent of Walsh's 112 beds, Antonsen said.

Instead, Walsh and the other medical units have been repurposed to provide long-term care for patients too sick or incapacitated to remain in the prison infirmary, but not sick enough to need a hospital.

The four units in men's prisons always are full and have waiting lists.

"If there's an empty one, there's someone waiting to come in," said Aubre Papaleo, offender rehabilitation coordinator at Walsh.

ROME — Joseph Henry, 70, expects to die in prison.

Incarcerated at age 49, Henry won't be eligible for parole until he's 89. He's serving 40 years to life for criminal possession of a controlled substance, his sentence made tougher under the state's persistent felony offender law.

"I almost look forward to (death). I've had enough," said Henry, who has been imprisoned for the last three and a half years in the Walsh Regional Medical Unit, a maximum-security area within the medium-security Mohawk Correctional Facility in Rome.

A growing number of prisoners are likely to find themselves in similar situations. Like their counterparts nationwide, New York's prisoners are aging rapidly, with the number of inmates age 60 and older more than quadrupling between 1990 and the end of last year, according to the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.

And older prisoners are more likely to have serious health problems such as Henry, who lost both his legs in 2009 to poorly controlled diabetes.

Their illnesses are stressing the resources of the prison health care system.

"It's a real challenge. The aging population ... is really expanding and those numbers are continuing to rise," said Jack Beck, director of the Prison Visiting Project of the nonprofit Correctional Association of New York. "They place great demands on the system. The cost associated with an aging population is substantially higher than the average inmate."

Walsh, one of five regional medical units across the state, is undergoing a \$33 million expansion and renovation so the state can meet the demand for long-term, skilled nursing care.

Aging in prison

Some of the older inmates are senior citizens who committed crimes. But a disproportionate number of older prisoners already have served long prison terms.

The Rockefeller Drug Laws – passed in the 1970s and reformed in 2009 – and strict sentencing in the 1980s created a "tsunami of people that were destined to grow old in prison," said Tina Maschi, a professor at Fordham University's graduate school of social service known for her work on aging in the criminal justice system.

Prisoners age 60 and older now make up 3.6 percent of inmates statewide, up from 0.8 percent in 1990, according to corrections numbers.

Nationally, health care costs for older prisoners are estimated to run three to nine times as high as for younger prisoners, according to a Human Rights Watch report released in January.

New York inmates			
The time until the earliest possible release date as of Dec. 31, 2011:			
Age	60-69	70-	
79	80+		
Total inmates	1,634	331	
6-9 years	135	24	
10-19 years	119	20	
20+years	74	23	
Life without parole	8		

Source: New York State Department of Corrections and Community Service

Walsh's expansion and renovation, to be completed in December 2014, will update systems, add handicap-accessible rooms and rooms for isolation and discipline. It also will have 38 more beds, bringing the unit, already the largest in the state, up to 150.

The new beds probably will fill up soon, predicted Ann Rabideau, Mohawk's deputy superintendent for health.

The future

The number of older prisoners is expected to keep growing.

In a report released earlier this month, the American Civil Liberties Union projected that by 2030, there will be more than 400,000 federal and state inmates age 55 and older, making up more than one third of all prisoners. That would be an increase of 4,400 percent since 1981.

That means more inmates like Henry.

Henry said his care got much better after he came to Walsh. But with its blue-shirted guards, barred windows and security-driven rules, it still feels like a prison, he said.

When Henry found out that he needed a pacemaker about a year ago, he turned it down, he said, not wanting to use artificial means to prolong his life – and his prison stay.

"I would never do anything to harm myself," he said. "I wouldn't lay that on my children or grandchildren. But for natural causes, give me a good old-fashioned heart attack."

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