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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

Updated October 5, 2012, 11:10 a.m. ET

NY state sets tougher prison visitation rules

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York corrections officials set tougher rules this week that would suspend inmates' visitation privileges for up to six months for a drug violation.

The revised rules, effective at the state's 60 prison facilities, also authorize indefinitely suspending visitors' privileges for misbehavior that gets them kicked out once.

Previously, inmates found to have committed a drug violation and even those sent to special housing were eligible for visits, according to the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. Violations by visitors typically have meant termination only of that visit.

New rules also require all adult visitors to present valid, current photo identification.

The changes will enhance the visitation program while strengthening prison safety and security, Corrections Commissioner Brian Fischer said. More than 54,000 inmates are in the state prison system.

"Visitation is a very important aspect of ensuring that inmates remain connected to their families and loved ones," Fischer said. "We know that it can help them adjust to their incarceration, serve their time productively and prepare for re-entry into the community."

Under the new rules, an inmate found guilty by staff of any drug-related charges in the prison can lose visiting privileges for up to six months for the first offense and up to a year for the second offense.

Visitors who bring in drugs or other contraband can be arrested, a provision that didn't change. They are subject to searches as a condition of entry, including passing through a metal detector. They can include random ion scanning for drugs and explosives. Consensual strip searches are possible if authorities believe visitors have concealed contraband.

"If a visit is terminated, visiting privileges may be suspended for up to one week until the superintendent makes a decision reinstating, limiting, suspending or indefinitely suspending the visitor's visiting privileges," according to new program guidelines that were effective Oct. 1. Misbehavior includes, for example, being loud or abusive, exchanging anything with an inmate that's not first examined by a guard or having sex in the visiting room.

"We're not trying to make it punitive as much as emphasize the need for rules and regulations," corrections spokesman Peter Cutler said. Visitation is an important incentive to many inmates, he said.

Correctional officials also have a 24-page directive on packages and articles that can be sent or brought to inmates. While contraband is seized, other unapproved items, such as food, tobacco and toiletries beyond designated limits, are to be returned to visitors when they leave.

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