

Press-Republican

June 23, 2013

Prison program to be eliminated

By *FELICIA KRIEG* Press-Republican

Press-Republican

---- — DANNEMORA — The Merle Cooper Program, a popular therapeutic offering for inmates at Clinton Correctional Facility, will be abolished in the coming months.

“This is going to take some time to set up,” said Tom Mailey, spokesperson for the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). “The goal is September sometime. It could take longer.”

INTENSIVE

The Merle Cooper Program began in 1977 and is named for a long-time business officer for Dannemora State Hospital who died in the 1970s.

According to the Department of Corrections’ website, Merle Cooper Program is a therapeutic, community-intensive, long-term counseling series for offenders experiencing adjustment difficulties, either during their time in prison or with life circumstances in general.

Typically, inmates who participate in the program have been incarcerated more than once; had a history of substance abuse or psychiatric treatment; chronic disciplinary problems; bizarre and/or violent crimes and/or escalating seriousness and violence of criminal behavior, according to the agency’s website.

In the Merle Cooper Program, group counseling gives offenders the opportunity to openly evaluate their life experiences, the Department of Corrections says on the site.

INMATES UPSET

As of June 19, the Press-Republican had received 11 letters from inmates at Clinton Correctional who said they were upset about the decision to eliminate the program.

In their letters, inmates spoke of the positive change the Merle Cooper Program instilled in them and how they believe they will be better equipped to live a crime-free, productive life should they be released from prison.

“To me, there isn’t any other program in the whole prison system like this one that helps people like myself believe that there is life without crime when we go home,” wrote Shawn Turner, who is serving a maximum of six years for selling drugs.

Turner said he has earned his GED since enrolling in the program.

NEW PROGRAM

The department is taking the steps to close the Merle Cooper Program and start a new one that will be in the Special Needs Unit in the main portion of Clinton Correctional.

The staff who ran Merle Cooper will be shifted to the new program and its special-needs population, Mailey said.

The 213 inmates enrolled in it now will remain in the Clinton Correctional Annex after the program is no longer in operation, he said.

SPECIAL NEEDS

The Special Needs Unit is housed in what is referred to as “the Main” because those inmates need a higher degree of mental-health service, he said.

The New York State Office of Mental Health is responsible for establishing the guidelines that define which inmates are considered “special needs,” he said.

The unit provides long-term habilitative services to offenders who have been identified as developmentally disabled or who have significant intellectual and adaptive behavior deficits, according to the Department of Corrections website.

Generally, inmates in the Special Needs Unit have a Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale IQ of 70 or less and have been referred to the unit by a psychologist.

“The ultimate goal of the program is to provide skills which allow the offender to be mainstreamed to general population and enable them to benefit from regular facility programming,” the website said.

“The SNU (Special Needs Unit) program prepares offenders to return to their community by assisting in the development of linkages to post-incarceration community-service providers.”

‘WATCH EVERYBODY’

Mailey said other programming will be available to the inmates who were in the Merle Cooper Program, based on their individual needs as assessed by the DOCCS.

“No one is going without; (the Merle Cooper participants) will be placed in program where their needs are met,” he said.

“We watch everybody. We don’t want anyone who’s going to struggle to struggle. We keep an eye on everyone.”

Mailey said that after the program was evaluated, the decision to shutter it was made by the Office of the Commissioner of Corrections.

It had nothing to do with budget cuts or a shifting of funds, he said.

The program is not state mandated, Mailey said.

Some inmates volunteered to participate in the Merle Cooper Program, and it's possible others were required to take part, he said.

CHARITABLE WORK

In a letter, inmate Nicholas Catalfamo cited the charitable work the inmates do as part of the Merle Cooper Program.

These included the annual Martin Luther King Food Drive and work in the furniture shop, where inmates make toys for children at Christmastime.

Catalfamo said that last year, inmates crafted and hand-painted more than 167 wooden toys and that close to 2 tons of food was donated to local food shelves.

Further charitable work may or may not be an option for the former participants of the Merle Cooper Program, Mailey said.

Clinton County Fair Manager Glenn Gillespie previously told the Press-Republican that inmates made the new signs on display at the fairgrounds this year.

Catalfamo said that activity was part of the Merle Cooper Program.

"I am sure there are a lot of our readers who have somehow been touched by the Merle Cooper Program and (do) not even know it," wrote Catalfamo, who was convicted of murder and has been incarcerated since 1992.

"All of us here will truly miss doing things to help out and give back."

LIFE-CHANGING PROGRAM

In their letters to the Press-Republican, the inmates explained how the program has helped them change their way of thinking, their perspective and their feelings toward their victims.

"It was not until I came to the Merle Cooper Program and took on this concept of how to live that I began to see my victim as a human being, a person," wrote Darren Davis, who was convicted of murder and has been incarcerated since 1990.

"My personal change came from confrontational-style counseling to deconstruct my criminal beliefs and principles and to destroy those distorted beliefs I picked up in the street," wrote Jerry Perez, who was convicted of two counts of second-degree murder and has been in prison since 1991.

"We cannot strengthen one segment of the population and ignore the other," wrote Ronald Hughes, an inmate for 23 years for a murder conviction. "We must consider the victims and the prisoner when we make decisions to close programs that are actually changing the lives of men who once didn't care."

With their letters, inmates King Modest and Nicholas Catalfamo sent copies of the Merle Cooper Program mission statement to the Press-Republican.

"It is through these changes and expansion of choices that individuals have a greater opportunity to return to society and remain in their community without engaging in further criminal activities," it says.

Mailey said the goal of DOCCS is to provide a “safe, secure atmosphere” for inmates and prepare them for reintegration back into society.

Email Felicia Krieg: fkrieg@pressrepublican.com Twitter: [@FeliciaKrieg](https://twitter.com/FeliciaKrieg)