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NY Observer: Editorial: From Prison to College

By The Editors

New York spends approximately \$60,000 per year to feed and house a single inmate in its vast prison system. About 40 percent of released prisoners wind up back in state custody.

Recidivism is not a uniquely New York problem, but Governor Andrew Cuomo has proposed a solution that would put the state at the forefront of 21st-century prison reform. He is calling for a program that would offer bachelor's and associate's degrees to inmates in 10 prisons scattered around the state.

The governor's office estimates that such a program would cost New York about \$5,000 per year for each inmate who participates. Mr. Cuomo argues, correctly, that a prisoner who leaves the system with a college degree is far less likely to return.

While many details still have to be worked out, there's no question that Mr. Cuomo's program deserves the support of the legislature and voters. It simply makes sense.

Some 54,000 inmates currently are in state custody. If 40 percent of them seem destined to return to the system upon release, it would be foolish for the state to stand aside and allow the cycle of incarceration to proceed without some kind of intervention.

Mr. Cuomo's proposal builds on programs already available in 22 prisons in conjunction with several private colleges, including Cornell and Bard. Those programs are privately funded and modest in scale—although absolutely praiseworthy.

The governor's office did not put a price tag on the new initiative, but it would seem clear that any investment in reducing recidivism is money well-spent. Although it is nearly 20,000 lower than it was 15 years ago, New York's prison population remains too high. If freed inmates can rebuild their lives with the help of a college degree, the state and society are better off.

Critics no doubt will charge that the state is offering yet another unreasonable benefit to prisoners (along with heat, hot water, food and cable television). With any luck, such demagoguery will find little traction in this election year.

Mr. Cuomo's creative response to a seemingly intractable problem deserves serious consideration. A society that simply recycles its prison population is a society that has run out of ideas.