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### **Watertown Daily Times: Opening doors**

There is no doubt that having a college degree would offer ex-convicts an advantage in seeking employment.

With the state spending about \$60,000 to house a prisoner each year, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo would like to reduce recidivism from its rate of 40 percent. He believes allowing inmates to earn college degrees while serving their sentences would keep more of them from returning to prison.

“Giving men and women in prison the opportunity to earn a college degree costs our state less and benefits our society more,” Gov. Cuomo was quoted as saying in an Associated Press story published Monday in the Watertown Daily Times. “Existing programs show that providing a college education in our prisons is much cheaper for the state and delivers far better results. Someone who leaves prison with a college degree has a real shot at a second lease on life because their education gives them the opportunity to get a job and avoid falling back into a cycle of crime.”

If implemented, the program would offer “associate and bachelor degree education at 10 prisons, one in each region of the state,” according to the story. The New York State Department of Correctional Services has partnered with colleges and universities to provide privately funded degree programs at 22 prisons, the story reported.

“According to Cuomo’s office, New York currently spends approximately \$3.6 billion in total costs for prisons. The program will add approximately \$5,000 per year per inmate that enrolls. Cuomo didn’t specify the cost of the overall program,” the story reported.

This would be a worthwhile program for state prisoners, although questions remain about how it would be funded. Inmates will eventually leave prison, and ensuring they have a more solid educational background should improve their chances of getting back on their feet and becoming self-sufficient.

But people face more challenges once they leave prison other than their highest level of education attained. And some of these are beyond Gov. Cuomo’s ability to fix. Many employers will not consider hiring people who have been incarcerated regardless of what college degrees they may hold. In a state like New York where the economy is sluggish, former prisoners have a very difficult time securing job offers.

This is compounded by the fact that people who have been convicted of felonies are barred from receiving most types of federal assistance, such as subsidized housing or food stamps. So now these people can’t get a job and don’t qualify for most federal benefits they need to support themselves.

Slipping back into a life of crime is far too easy for many former prisoners. There are some fundamental changes we must make to help ex-convicts become productive members of society.

They need access to resources to keep from returning to prison. Gov. Cuomo's proposal is a good step in the right direction, but there are many more steps needed to designate a clear path.