

Union: Prison assaults rising

State denies that reclassifying inmates has increased danger

By Robert Gavin | October 30, 2014

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The union that represents state correction officers wants prison officials to address a rise in the number of inmate attacks on prison staff members — including an Oct. 21 assault on a first-year female officer at Greene Correctional Facility that a union official said could have become a sexual assault.

The New York State Correctional Officers Police Benevolent Association says that reclassifying inmates during recent prison closings has caused a "more violent workplace for our officers," Michael Mazzella, the union's Mid Hudson Region's vice president, said in a statement released Thursday.

Prison officials say an increase in the number of assaults on staff members has nothing to do with closing prisons.

"Contrary to the union's claim, no inmate reclassifications occurred as a result of prison closures; nor did DOCCS close any maximum security facilities," said Anthony Annucci, Department of Corrections and Community Supervision acting commissioner.

It was "unfortunate that the correction officers' union failed to include certain details when referring to an assault on one of its female members," state Annucci said in a statement.

"An investigation found the assault on staff would have been avoided altogether had DOCCS' long-standing protocols been followed," he said.

The union's statement highlighted the attack on the female officer by Omar Richardson, 32, who is serving a 20-year sentence for attempted murder, robbery and weapon possession in Manhattan in 2001.

Union officials said Richardson hid in a locker in a supply room and attacked the officer when she entered the room.

They say he grabbed her, restrained her and said he wanted to "kiss" and "taste" her. The officer broke free after a brief struggle and called for help. Officers answering the call restrained Richardson.

Richardson, who has been disciplined at the prison several times, was transferred to a maximum security prison, officials said.

"The officer was extremely lucky to have broken free from the inmate and call for assistance. It is our belief that if the inmate had been able to restrain the officer she would have been sexually assaulted," Mazzella stated.

The officer was not injured. The officers who helped her suffered minor injuries and were treated at the prison.

Mazzella's statement said: "This needs to be addressed by DOCCS or the attacks on staff will continue to rise."

Annucci said a male correction officer left the door to the room unsecured, which he called a "clear violation that endangers everyone — allowing the inmate to gain access to the room and carry out his assault against the female officer reporting to duty."

Annucci said he called the officer who was attacked and stressed that one assault on staff is too many.

He said Richardson faces 11 internal disciplinary charges, possible criminal prosecution and the possibility that his 2018 release could be delayed.

The department said Gov. Andrew Cuomo closed seven prisons on 2011, when there were 563 assaults on staff. The next year, it said, assaults on staff dropped to 534.

It said about 80 percent of the attacks were in the state's 17 maximum-security lock-ups.

The state's other 37 prisons are either medium or minimum security.