

The Record News: Lawmakers push to revive college aid for prison inmates

By Kyle Hughes, NYSNYS News

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Legislators and advocates urged the state Tuesday to provide college financial aid to state prison inmates, with Assemblyman Jeffrion Aubry comparing the lack of funding to slavery.

They also sharply criticized Gov. Andrew Cuomo for dropping support for the education prison inmates after a public outcry two years ago.

“The governor two years ago came to the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus church service and decided to announce that we, the state of New York, were going to reinvest in college in the state prisons in New York,” Aubry said. “And a hell storm blew him back 20 years into the hole.”

“He didn’t talk about it again, right, because upstate folks, union folks, the correction officers union, all of the reactionaries across the top of this state just hooted and hollered and screamed. (Joe) Six-pack got in charge, ‘No we can’t do that. I can’t send my kids. How can we send them? We need to punish, punish, punish, punish.’ “

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Aubry, a Queens Democrat who is one of three deputy speakers in the Assembly, then compared the prison system’s denial of college courses to inmates to slavery.

“You know what, there was a time in this country where if you were black and a slave it was against the law to teach you ... those who would teach you were punished and those who were taught were punished. I wonder if this is not the same scenario.”

“Does America need an underclass so bad that they’re afraid that these black and brown people who we incarcerate, supposedly to help them become better citizens, are afraid of them coming out with the skills and knowledge to actually be contributing parts of our society.”

“In some way or another we have to consider that as a possibility, because what other would explain it? What would cause so many people to raise up, to scream and yell about the thought that education would be given to those who most need it and who most lack it.”

He said not educating inmates is another way to “fill the jails.”

“We have won the logic battle,” Aubry said of the argument that everyone benefits by educating inmates. “All they have is six-packs and screaming and yelling.”

“The key to this, the turning on the TAP, the person that’s most significant in this whole conversation in addition to you, is your governor,” said Senator Bill Perkins (D-Harlem).

Lawmakers and advocates are pushing to revive a state program to provide TAP college aid to prison inmates. The program began to be rolled back in the early 1990s, after President Clinton signed a law barring Pell Grants for prisoners.

New York followed suit when Gov. George Pataki took office in 1995 and the TAP ban was put in place. Some college-level study is still provided, but not to the extent that is needed, they said.

According to the Education Inside Out Coalition, which held Tuesday’s press conference, about 59 percent of the state’s 53,000 prison inmates have high school diplomas. They estimate that about 3,200 prison inmates would be eligible for TAP if it is reinstated.

The average TAP payment to a participating prison inmate in 1994 was \$1,400.

Advocates said the current corruption scandals in the Legislature might be enough to move the bill forward in the Senate, where it has stalled.

“I think that maybe, just maybe members of the Legislature who might be feeling a little more vulnerable now that they might also be going to prison might be more compassionate about this issue, so now is a good time to raise it,” said Vivian Nixon of the Inside Out Coalition.