

The Daily Star - Cuomo finds new funding sources for inmate tuition

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1/14/2016

Gov. Andrew Cuomo has a new plan for funding college classes for prison inmates — one that does not require the approval of state lawmakers reluctant to go along with the idea.

His attempt to drive state funds to such programs was stymied by the Republican-led state Senate two years ago. This time, however, he repackages the initiative so that instead of having taxpayers bear the costs, it would be financed with a mix of \$7.5 million in private donations and \$7.5 million in forfeiture dollars held by Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr.

"It's wrong to put people in cages and waste young lives," he said over the weekend as he revealed the program at a church in Harlem to supporters of the initiative.

The new measure, said state Sen. Jim Seward, R-Milford, is "slightly more palatable" than the earlier one, as it involves no taxpayer dollars.

However, the senator called Cuomo's new pivot an "end around" lawmakers, by carving into the forfeiture dollars without any input or oversight on the part of the Legislature.

"It's another example of executive overreach," said Seward. "We are seeing it in Washington with the president, and we're seeing it in New York with the governor."

Seward conceded that there is little the Legislature can do about the maneuver. He said he'd much rather see the money in question be directed to buying protective gear for police officers now "under assault" in their own communities.

State officials have said colleges that participate in the program will be paid \$5,000 per inmate for 30 credit hours per semester. Prisoners serving life terms would be ineligible to participate.

Supporters of the program maintain it will reduce recidivism, with Cuomo criticizing the "warehousing" of felons without doing more to rehabilitate them.

Delaware County Undersheriff Craig DuMond said he sides squarely with Seward in the debate.

"With this money now at (Cuomo's) disposal, maybe we should be using it to educate the children of the people who were victimized by these criminals," DuMond said.

He also questioned whether the inmates, if they do earn college degrees, would be able to line up jobs because their felony convictions would remain on their record.

Cuomo is expected to mention the college classes for inmates in his annual State of the State speech Wednesday. It was not immediately known if he will address the escape from Clinton Correctional Facility last year of two convicted killers, David Sweat and Richard Matt.

That event sparked an intensive and expensive manhunt and produced days of unflattering headlines for the prison system after it was revealed the escapees were aided by a prison staffer who was having an adulterous affair with one of the men.