

The Journal News - Corrections, parole work presents risks, rewards - View

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Innovative programs in New York's prisons cut recidivism rates by creating productive members of society

Monday marks the beginning of Corrections and Community Supervision Employee Week in New York State: a recognition of the hard-working men and women in the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. We have an outstanding staff of 29,000 employees — including more than 17,000 correction officers — charged with the challenging task of supervising some of the most dangerous people in the state. Our employees perform their jobs with professionalism and, far too often, their important contributions to our criminal justice system go unnoticed or under-appreciated.

This week, we also acknowledge the Department's Parole Officers and civilian staff who day in and day out ensure that our facilities operate safely, while helping offenders prepare for a successful transition back into the community.

On Wednesday, DOCCS' annual ceremony honors the 42 men and women who tragically died in the line of duty. Medals of Honor and Medals of Merit are presented to a group of current staff members who have gone above and beyond their jobs. And this year, we especially thank our deployed staff who searched tirelessly for and aided in the capture of the prisoners who escaped one year ago. All of these people, past and present, are the true heroes in the story of our agency.

As Acting Commissioner, I am honored to work with professionals who view public service as a noble calling.

Thanks to Gov. Andrew Cuomo's vision, the Department has worked tirelessly to improve successful inmate reentry into society and reduce recidivism. Although we are often publicly maligned, the truth is that similar organizations from all around the world seek to replicate many of our successful programs, which have reduced recidivism, enhanced public safety, and ultimately saved taxpayer dollars. For instance, our facilities host college programs designed to provide our inmates with the skills they need to be successful on the outside, hold a steady job, and be productive members of society. And we are expanding this opportunity to 1,000 additional inmates over the next five years through a partnership with the Manhattan District Attorney's office.

The Department is also committed to changing the culture inside of our institutions. In Westchester County, our staff at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, including other facilities, have embraced innovation and oversee a litany of programs designed to assist in the rehabilitation process. We offer vocational programs such as carpentry that

teaches inmates how to read blueprints and to understand building codes and weatherization. We provide mental health treatment and substance abuse services for inmates suffering from emotional or psychiatric issues. Those inmates who are on the cusp of reentering our communities are offered transitional services that are evidenced-based and results oriented.

None of this would be possible without our professional and dedicated security ranks.

We also have an obligation to provide a safe and secure workplace for all employees, volunteers and the inmates we supervise. The Department is doing just that, providing our security staff with the resources necessary to do their job safely. We recently increased staffing by over 100 correction officers and, just last month, Gov. Cuomo highlighted the addition of over \$1 million for new state-of-the-art technology to prevent contraband and weapons from being used inside our facilities.

We continue to think outside the box about new methods to improve prison safety. We are expanding the number of cameras inside select facilities, have begun implementing a pilot program that utilizes body cameras, and soon we will be testing the use of pepper spray within certain facilities.

Finally, we place a high premium on open lines of communication, which is why the Department regularly meets to discuss safety concerns with our employees and their collective bargaining units. It is important to remember that our goal is to keep our prisons and communities safe, while ensuring that all DOCCS' employees go home to their families at the end of the work day.

During this special week, the Department proudly acknowledges our entire staff — and you should too. They have helped make this agency one of the best corrections departments in the country, and I am proud to continue to serve by their side.

The writer is acting commissioner of the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.