

## Overhaul prisons to cut costs

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With the economy slowing and increasingly uncertain, New York needs to find ways to reduce expenses without harming essential public services. The state already faces closing a projected budget gap of \$5.1 billion in the coming fiscal year, and that gap has been adjusted upward once just since January.

One place where the state can extract such savings is in its prison system. New York simply does not need all 69 of its correctional facilities. Some of those facilities are now more than half-empty, particularly at the medium- and minimum-security level. Two new maximum-security facilities -- Upstate in Malone and Five Points in Romulus -- have eased demand for beds at that level. Once-overcrowded facilities are simply not anymore.

Overall, the state's inmate population has gone down by 9,000 since the peak in 1999, primarily because drug-related incarceration, which used to account for 35 percent of the incoming prisoners, now accounts for only 21 percent.

FACTS: All of this means that the way New York manages its correctional facilities can change. Unneeded facilities should be closed used for other purposes. The number of correctional officers can be reduced, too. State leaders have been exceedingly slow to respond to the trend. They have resisted closing even one facility, and, as a result, the number of correctional officers employed by the state has dropped by only 500, or less than 2 percent, while the prison population has dropped by 13 percent. Camp Pharsalia, a minimum-security work camp in South Plymouth in Chenango County, is a good example. Efforts by then-Gov. George Pataki to redirect the facility, which had been operating at partial capacity and is still only half-full, for another state purpose were beaten back by a combination of local and legislative resistance. The opposition stemmed in part from the fact that local employment at the facility would lapse for six months while it was overhauled for an alternative use.

The case exemplifies how intertwined the issues of prison closure and economic development have become in many communities in upstate New York. But the prison system should be built around correctional needs, not local employment.

Otherwise, unnecessarily high tax rates will continue to discourage the very employment that so many upstate communities need. New York state already has the highest combined state and local tax rate in the nation, and excessive state spending is part of the problem.

Running prisons is expensive, and, while underutilized facilities are kept open, funding for other needs goes unmet. The annual cost of keeping someone in the custody of the prison system including debt service and fringe benefits for employees is about \$57,000 -- more than the cost of tuition, room and board at Cornell (now \$48,200 for the College of Arts and Sciences). The annual operating cost of the whole prison system is \$3.6 billion.

Gov. Eliot Spitzer has courageously decided to take another run at the issue and with more than one facility. He has given the one-year closure notice for Hudson, Camp McGregor, Camp Pharsalia, and Camp Gabriels, and plans to shrink the system over several years by 1,316 beds. The operating savings from these closures when fully annualized in the financial plan are estimated to reach \$34 million. Another \$30 million of savings in capital costs will be generated in fiscal year 2010.

These plans are a good start, but even more can and should be done to better use the facilities. The Citizens Budget Commission estimates that New York can save nearly \$300 million a year by fitting the size of the prison infrastructure to the population it serves. An additional \$100 million a year could be had from developing more effective and appropriate alternatives to incarceration for drug offenders. What constituent groups around the state must realize, as they are lining up to protest the governor's proposals, is that as long as these jobs are being supported by the state in underused facilities, there is no ability to invest as much in other important areas

including schools and real economic development -- the kind that brings private capital and jobs.

The governor has the right and the responsibility to run a prison system that meets the state's needs to safely provide for the inmates in custody with the appropriate number of correctional officers. The Legislature and the public need to support this concept, so that the real needs of these communities can be identified and addressed.

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