

Officials request parole reform

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By Amaris Elliott-Engel

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In the 1990s, New York state prisons staggered under a rising inmate population, and county jails were tapped to house alleged state parole violators pending their hearings.

But those days are over, thanks to several years of effective "rightsizing" policies that reduced the inmate population.

Now, county jail officials - including Cayuga County Sheriff Rob Outhouse - want the state to change the way it handles alleged parole violators.

The New York State Sheriffs' Association called last week for the state Legislature to mandate that DOCS take back responsibility for housing parole violators.

The group pointed to numbers showing the state inmate population dropped by 7,000 from the 1990s, but county jail inmate numbers haven't experienced a similar drop.

While the Cayuga County jail underwent expansion in 2001, that allowed the facility to house up to 180 inmates, Outhouse said other counties have more antiquated, smaller jails that struggle with overcrowding.

The sheriff's association also asked the state Legislature to increase the \$34 per day the state reimburses a county jail for housing parole violators, stating that the per day costs of housing prisoners far exceed that dollar amount.

By comparison, county jails receive a \$100 reimbursement per day for housing federal prisoners, an attractive revenue stream brought in by the 30-35 federal prisoners in the Cayuga County Jail, Outhouse said.

Outhouse said requiring county jails to house state parole violators was a case where a state mandate did not come with the proper amount of funding.

Parole officers are employed to deal with and arrest parole violators, Outhouse said, but it's county jails who have to house the violators on \$34 a day, which "isn't enough to cover the costs. We bear the brunt of costs."

The sheriffs' association also asked that parole violators either be taken back to the facility where they were paroled, or to the closest facility to the parole violation, so "then the county jails wouldn't have overcrowding due to parole violators," Outhouse said.

State prison administrators could not be reached for comment.

"I fully support the sheriffs' effort to change this state unfunded mandate," said state Sen. Michael Nozzolio, R-Fayette.

Nozzolio, who is chairman of the public protection subcommittee that will scrutinize Gov. George Pataki's budget proposals, which will be introduced Tuesday. Nozzolio said the problem can be addressed by ensuring no state inmates are housed in county jails. Or, he said, lawmakers can make sure an increase in the daily reimbursement for housing parole violators is put through.

Assemblyman Robert Oaks, R-Macedon, said that housing parole violators in county jails without adequate reimbursement has been an issue for a long time. With the drop in the total number of state prisoners, Oaks thinks the state Legislature should increase the level of reimbursement and require state prisons to house state parole violators.

"Certainly, it would seem it is a reasonable request by the counties with the fewer inmates that state is housing," Oaks said.

The union representing state corrections officers also supports the move by the sheriffs' association, saying that giving responsibility for parole violators back to state prisons might give a reason to keep some DOCS facilities slated for closure open.

"It's 100 percent accurate," said Grant Marin, the western region vice president for the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association, the union representing corrections officers. "We're down to 66,000 inmates. We certainly have space available."

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