

The Chief

Civil Service LEADER
THE CIVIL EMPLOYEES' WEEKLY

NYSCOPBA Campaigns Against Prison Closings

Despite Drop in Population

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DONN ROWE: Sees economic and safety impact.

New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association President Donn Rowe has protested a Department of Correctional Services proposal to close four minimum-security facilities, saying it could endanger the lives of Correction Officers because of an increase in the risk of inmate violence.

"NYSCOPBA is calling upon the Legislature to reject the budget proposal to close the four prisons in Franklin, Saratoga, Chenango and Madison Counties," Mr. Rowe said. "Closing these facilities will threaten public safety and mean layoffs for communities that are already facing tough economic times."

DOCS Cites Drop in Inmates

DOCS Commissioner Brian Fischer has said the closures, which will also hit correctional camps and prison annexes, are necessary because of a declining prison population caused by a lower crime rate over the last decade.

"Our success means the time has come for major changes in the prison system," Mr. Fischer said during an address to the Citizens Crime Commission in Manhattan last month. "At a time when New York is facing its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, Governor Paterson has rightly recognized this as an opportunity to save taxpayers significant money by allowing me to manage the prison system more intelligently."

BRIAN FISCHER: Some prisons no longer needed.

NYSCOPBA has started a media campaign in targeted districts that would be most affected by the budget cuts. The union will use print and radio ads and direct mail.

DOCS Fixing Data?

"The New York State Department of Correctional Services continues to manipulate data to mislead the public about the capacity of our prisons, when in fact the DOCS itself issued a report acknowledging that our prisons are operating at 104 percent capacity," Mr. Rowe said. "Closing additional prisons will cause further overcrowding, endangering the lives of Correction Officers and increasing the risk of inmate violence."

Mr. Fischer recently said the facts of a declining prison population are abundantly clear. "We have more than 7,000 vacant beds in our system, spread over 70 correctional institutions," he said in support of the Governor's proposal. "Our minimum security population has dropped by more than 50 percent over the last nine years."

NYSCOPBA has made suggestions to trim waste from DOCS, starting with the central office where, it contends, there are more than 900 employees, many of whom make well more than \$100,000 a year.

"The Commissioner of Correction need look no further than his own office which is top-heavy with expensive and unnecessary management," said Mr. Rowe. He added that there is layer upon layer of administrators who work in the state's 70 prisons who could be trimmed to cut costs.

Commissioner Fischer said the closings could be done in such a way as to avoid layoffs of state Correctional employees and save nearly \$30 million a year. "Now more than ever, we need to bring state government's expenses in line with its shrinking revenues," he said. Reduction of the 20,000-person DOCS staff will be achieved through attrition, Mr. Fischer said, since about 40 employees retire every two weeks.

Claims Cuts Threaten Safety

Mr. Rowe opposes such cost-cutting because he said it would affect the safety of state prison employees. "Our members work in some of the most dangerous and stressful conditions imaginable and in return all we ask is that we work in a safe and secure environment," he said. "Yet, when it comes time to make cuts, the Commissioner turns to those on the front line, proposing we guard more inmates with less staff.

"Shuttling inmates from one prison into another overcrowded prison at the expense of the safety of Correction Officers, inmates and numerous communities is not the answer."