

Corrections officers say budget cuts affect safety

By Sarah Gantz / The Citizen

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AUBURN - Budget woes have cut corrections officers positions at New York's prisons at an alarming rate and have left the prisons vulnerable to trouble, prison workers and union representatives told lawmakers at a forum Wednesday.

A increasingly disproportionate officer-to-inmate ratio endangers inmates, civilian workers and the officers themselves. A major incident is inevitable, they said, if cuts continue.

Corrections officers and union representatives of local facilities voiced their concern that while administrative positions remain largely untouched, the people who work directly with prisoners are losing their jobs, at a forum held by Assemblymen Gary Finch, R-Springport, Joe Giglio, R-Gowanda, and Robert C. Oaks, R-Macedon in Auburn Wednesday. The forum was one in a series the assemblymen are holding throughout the state to gather information about workplace concerns at correctional facilities.

Since 1999, more than 2500 corrections officers have been eliminated in New York, a cut the Department of Correctional Services credits to a decreased inmate population at the state's facilities.

About 60,000 people are incarcerated in New York's prisons today, 10,000 fewer than in 1999, when the state's facilities were at their peak, with 71,000 inmates. But prisons are still full, said Chris Leo, legislative director for the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association, Inc.

Facilities that previously operated at 130 percent capacity dropped to just over 100 percent capacity after losing 10,000 inmates, he said.

"You're outnumbered. You're outnumbered bad," said Brian Smith, a corrections officer at Auburn Correctional Facility, where there can be as few as four officers to oversee as many as 300 inmates in the yard.

"There's always going to be fights in the yard," Smith said. "Prison is prison."

But cutting officers will only make the facilities more dangerous for inmates as well as prison workers, he said.

In 1993, the state pulled corrections officers from the Auburn facility's commissary, state shop, store house and laundry room - areas that are accessed by the facility's maximum security inmates daily and that are staffed primarily by female civilian workers, said Patricia Casler, local president of CSEA in Auburn.

“We were always told those were areas where they never pulled the officers,” she said.

Requests to have the officers replaced have gone unanswered since, Casler said, even after a woman was attacked two years ago and an inmate convicted of her attempted rape and murder.

“There's a lot of nooks and crannies and scary places,” she said.

Staircases and hallways go without constant supervision because there simply are not enough officers to roam out of sight places. Unlike in prison settings seen on television, New York inmates - even those at maximum security facilities - are not locked-up all day.

Union representatives say the cuts in corrections officer positions are unnecessary. Budget cuts could be better met by consolidating administrative offices and personnel, said Leo.

“We're in full support of helping the state if everyone is going to feel the pain,” he said.

But so far, the pain has been felt only by those within the walls, he said.

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