

## Carole Estabrook: Prisons need full staffing

By Carole Estabrook

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Thousands of corrections officer positions have disappeared in New York state over the past decade, a trend the state Department of Correctional Services attributes to a decrease in the inmate population. Currently the state prison system is holding about 60,000 inmates, a decrease of more than 10,000 since 1999. But union representatives for the guards have warned that the prisons are still full.



In fact, the union argues, facilities that previously operated at 130 percent capacity dropped to just over 100 percent. With full occupancy, the union fears that further layoffs will have a catastrophic affect on the safety of inmates, officers and civilian workers.

If the cuts continue, workers fear that the inmate-to-prisoner ratio could become unmanageable. As it is, many stairwells and hallways are not under constant supervision. There simply aren't enough officers to roam in out-of-sight places, which is very dangerous as the inmates aren't always locked-up in a cell.

It certainly doesn't make sense to continue cutting the people working in the trenches. I feel confident that a lot of the budget problems could be addressed by consolidating administrative offices and personnel, as the union has suggested.

Besides which, the administration end has gone untouched, even after years of corrections officer job cuts. It isn't fair to put prison guards on the chopping block, without investigating ways to better economize, from the top person down to the most junior employee. Remember, being a "junior" officer doesn't mean you aren't valuable. In fact, the junior officers often spend the most face time with the prisoners.

I don't know about you, but I know that I would definitely feel a lot safer at night knowing the prison was generously staffed, as opposed to running on a skeleton crew.

At least some of our political officials have taken notice. Assemblymen Gary Finch, R-Springport, Joe Giglio, R-Gowanda, and Robert C. Oaks, R-Macedon are in the midst of a series of forums, held throughout the state, to gather information about the situation from the workers without relying on raw data and statistics. (DOCS has its own interpretation of data that puts the state prison system at 89 percent occupancy rate.)

Facts and figures don't always paint an accurate picture. Hopefully, if the guards stick together and voice their opinions strongly enough, officials will not let the cuts continue. After all, the only thing keeping some of the nation's most notorious murderers, thieves and rapists off of the Auburn Streets are those officers.

As far as I'm concerned, there is no such thing as too many prison guards.

Estabrook's column appears

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