

If New York Fails To Cut Administrative Bloat Within Prison System, WNY Could Be Targeted For Future Closings of State Facilities, So Says The New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association

Local Television Commercial Part Of Statewide Campaign To Stop Closings/Union Says Public Would Be Better Served By State Cutting Contracted Administrative Positions Than Closing Prisons – Which Ultimately Puts Guards, Inmates and General Public At R

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(BUFFALO) - If the State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) is not dissuaded from closing four prisons it has targeted across New York, Western New York and its medium and maximum security facilities could be next, the president of the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA) tells WNYLaborToday.com.

Anyone who has watched television in recent weeks more than likely has seen a 30-second commercial that's being run by NYSCOPBA, which represents more than 23,000 New York State Correctional Employees across the State, including around 7,000 here in Western New York. It is part of the Union's statewide public campaign aimed at stopping the DOCS from closing four targeted prisons, including the Butler Minimum Security Prison in nearby Wayne County, and drawing the attention of both the general public and state elected officials to a number of negative repercussions should it be allowed to happen.

Instead of closing prisons, NYSCOPBA President Donn Rowe contends the DOCS should instead opt to cut a number of administrative positions - included contracted, outside consultants - rather than close the four targeted prisons, a

decision that Union officials bluntly describe as "a difference between life and death."

"We've opened some eyes with this campaign," Rowe told WNYLaborToday.com during a telephone interview from Albany. "Over the past ten years, the state has cut the positions of twenty-five-hundred (correction) officers, while (at the same time) doubling its administrative staff. There are nearly one-thousand employed at DOCS administrative headquarters and so many more around the state. In some cases these hires are also driving state vehicles and living in housing paid for by the state. "

The DOCS has proposed closing both the Lyon Mountain Minimum Security Prison in Clinton County and Butler Minimum Security Prison in Wayne County in January 2011. The Moriah Shock Facility in Essex County and Ogdensburg Medium Security Prison in St. Lawrence County would also be closed, but in April 2011. Reportedly, the DOCS says the closings will save New York \$7 million in fiscal year 2010-2011 and another \$52 million in 2011-2012, as well as bringing about an overall reduction in the number of employed positions to 572 - with those who are affected offered jobs that would fill vacancies in other state prison locations.

NYSCOPBA officials - who counter with their claim the corrections workforce would be cut by nearly 650 positions by those four prison closings, and which comes on the heels of losing 2,500 more corrections positions over the past 10 years - also charges DOCS is turning a blind eye towards the problem of inmate overcrowding within the prison system.

With just under 60,000 inmates currently housed within the state's jails and prisons, Rowe also charged that jails are now running at a 102% capacity, while maximum security prisons across New York are at 122% capacity. The NYSOPBA president says many inmates currently live in double-bunked cells that were originally designed to hold a single inmate, a situation that not only increases the problem of inmate overcrowding, but creates an even more hazardous workplace for Unionized Correction Officers to do their jobs.

"You would think the state commissioner would admit to the overcrowding problem. It's not like it was back in school with one desk for each student. These institutions were never built to handle the inmate stress they now do. If (DOCS) continues down this road of 'risk management' (and is successful in closing the targeted four prisons) and closes facilities, I believe they'll continue to close and consolidate in other areas of the state," said Rowe, pointing to Western New York's many medium-and-maximum-security prisons, including those in Attica, Collins, Gowanda, Lakeview, Wende and Wyoming, as well as the Buffalo and Rochester Work Release Programs.

"Absolutely," was the reply given by NYSCOPBA Western Region Vice President Al Mothershed, who was interviewed earlier this week by

WNYLaborToday.com in Buffalo. "They may be targeting four now, but what are they considering on top of that? They haven't told us, but I think they would absolutely go after places like Collins and Gowanda, which went through consolidations last year," he said.

Added Rowe: "Tough times call for tough choices, but choosing to close prisons at the risk of public safety and jobs is a choice New York cannot afford. (NYSCOPBA's public) campaign is informing New Yorkers of the devastating proposal their Legislators are considering and (the Union) urge them to make their voices heard before it's too late. Our goal is to protect public safety and to save jobs and we will not stop fighting until we do. DOCS has yet again ignored our idea to make cuts to their own bloated administrative bureaucracy."

Both the leadership of the state Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) and the Public Employees Federations (PEF) have also pointed at high-paid, external consultants on the public payroll - which could equate to a savings, they say, if New York decides to conduct its business in a different manner and as NYSCOPBA representatives suggest: "Right-size the system, make the necessary administrative changes and cut the waste instead of cutting front-line staff."

NYSCOPBA Western Region Vice President Mothershed, meanwhile, told WNYLaborToday.com that if the four targeted prisons do close, it is certain a number of violent felons will be released, which will put public safety in jeopardy.

"Some violent felons may be considered first offenders or low-level offenders, but what people don't realize is this may not be their 'first time' and they may have had their original charge plead down. We're dealing with society's misfits, everything from low-level drug offenders to murderers - the worst of the worst - who could not abide by the law. We need the state and the Legislature to come to their senses. We need to right-size our prison system and get rid of the double-bunk process. It's bloated at the top. We don't need that," Mothershed said.

On top of the problems within the state prison system, Union officials say it is also becoming harder to recruit new corrections officers. There are dangers to the job, said Mothershed, who tells WNYLaborToday.com he has personally worked in the state prison system for 28 years. He pointed to DOCS-released statistics that show 840 assaults by inmates against staff last year. On the flip side, the average yearly corrections officer salary is \$50,000 - which is only reached after 10 years of service. Starting pay stands around \$37,000.

"This is a thankless job," Mothershed said. "It's not like when you were a kid and you'd say, 'I want to grow up to be a corrections officer.' You have to have a certain mentality to take on this job. We test twice a year and we're having a

hard time finding people and it will be even harder with the new pay tier that has been imposed by the state."

During a news conference held earlier this month in Albany to announce the Union's public campaign, NYSCOPBA Executive Vice President Chris Hickey - who also took time to criticize DOCS for not cutting administrative positions, which, in the end, put the inmates and the public at risk - said: "(The State has) decided to balance the budget on the backs of those who serve as our front line of protection for both our inmates and the public. It leads to an escalated level of potential danger for correctional officers and sergeants, and the inmates, but cutting from the administrative bureaucracy won't heighten any risk for front-line staff."