

Inside The Box

The Other Side Of The Story

By Matthew Hattley



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After reading "Correction Officers Want Better Safety Inside Prisons," by Heather Yakin in the Times Herald Record of October 30th, 2014, I felt the need to respond.

I have been housed in several state facilities over the past twenty plus years. I have firsthand experience of exactly what occurs within prisons and why.

First, and very important, if there is in fact a rise in violence, which I personally have not witnessed over the past ten years, it would have absolutely nothing to do with prison closures. The prisons were closed because the prison population declined from 71,500 in 1999 to the current 54,000.

Also, when a prison is closed, the entire population and staff are transferred to other prisons throughout the state. New York currently has fifty four. Employees do not lose their jobs unless they specifically choose to retire or quit due to a longer commute. Facilities usually become overstaffed during closures since the unions are extremely powerful.

Second, being that the Department of Corrections no longer double bunk, that is put two people in a single cell, to even suggest there's overcrowding is just blatantly untrue. Today, most facilities operate at 90-95 percent capacity and the prison population continues to decline by at least a thousand inmates every year.

Third, you also cannot blame "more gangs, more drugs and more violent inmates in the prison now than in the past" for a perceived problem of violence. This is bigger than the prison population or the Department of Corrections.

Put things in perspective...

1. Prisons are unnatural environments.
2. Prison population is growing young with more 15-21 year olds.
3. There's a higher rate of individuals that require mental health treatment.
4. The security staff are not trained adequately to deal with today's population.

Can the prison environment become hostile and extremely violent? Absolutely, but not without warning or provocation. Understand: the dynamic of any facility is determined by the security staff who directly interact with us on a regular basis, not by the prison population.

Furthermore, to set the record straight there are real consequences if any incarcerated individuals physically assault the staff, whether civilian or security. An unusual incident report is generated and the individual(s) in question are arrested and charged for the crime. The new sentence usually runs consecutively with the current one, adding more time to what was already there.

The root of about 80 percent of all violent situations in here is a lack of respect. You can't verbally abuse, disrespect and humiliate any group of people on a daily basis for an extended period of time and not expect those people to react badly at some point. This applies out there in society as well.

Until we are viewed and treated as human beings, not vicious animals, there will continue to be a problem of assaults. The bias and racism must be removed from the equation.

A rational solution to this problem doesn't require rocket science, just some common sense. Treat us the way you wish to be treated. Period. Yes, it really is this simple.

The security staff must be educated and retrained on how to appropriately deal with the prison population and their various needs. All state employees are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner every day.

To be fair, I am only referring to a very small percentage of the security staff. Unfortunately in situations like this, everyone is affected. Take us for example. We are not saints. But the majority of us have shown progressive changes over the years, yet we are still viewed collectively, not as individuals.

So, to close, here's a thought. If State Senator John Bonacic, Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther, Assemblyman James Skoufis, and the president of the state correctional officers and Police Benevolent Association, Michael Power, are genuinely concerned about creating a safer prison environment, for everyone, then I've just given them enough of an insight to actually do what's both morally correct, and effective, for a change. Not just what the bureaucracy dictates.

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