

# Maximum-Security Prison's Mission Debated

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Northern Correctional Institution opened in 1995 to house the 300 worst convicts in Connecticut — those who assault guards or other inmates, start riots or prove to be an escape risk.

## POLICY

But over the years, the mission of the maximum-security prison in inmates shifted as its population swelled. It now houses close to 500 inmates, a significant percentage of them gang members.

Some lawmakers want Northern to return to its original role as the place for inmates who can't live by the rules of prison life.

"It's gotten away from its purpose, and that's really compromising the safety of the staff and the inmates," said Rep. Karen Jarmoc, an Enfield Democrat and chairwoman of legislative task force on correctional staff safety.

Jarmoc spoke Tuesday as the task force reviewed a draft

of its final report. The panel was formed last summer amid concern about inmate assaults. The report found that about 7 percent of the state's correction staff were assaulted in 2007. Meanwhile, the state's inmate population has increased from 18,384 in 2003 to 19,684 this year.

Jarmoc said she initially expected that the task force would consider measures such as buying protective gear for

guards, but that has not been the focus. Instead, the group is considering policy changes that proponents hope will reduce the likelihood that a guard will be assaulted.

Among the most controversial recommendations is the plan to use Northern exclusively to house high-risk inmates who assault guards and other prisoners. Lawmakers suggested that gang members

be moved to other facilities, or perhaps even transferred to prisons in other states.

The state Department of Correction is "adamantly opposed to removing gang members from Northern," Wayne Choinski, a district administrator for the department, told the panel.

Placing such inmates into the general prison population could end up strengthening the gangs by helping them

recruit new members and put other prisoners at risk, Choinski said. "You absolutely would not want to integrate [them]."

The meeting grew tense at times, as lawmakers and Choinski tussled over policy.

At one point, Choinski interrupted a correction officer who was discussing staffing levels. Such information should not be discussed publicly because it

could put guards at risk, Choinski said.

That didn't sit well with lawmakers, who were quick to scold Choinski. "We have a special responsibility to protect the public, the correction officers and the inmates within these facilities," said Sen. John Kissel, an Enfield Republican.

The correction department is not "an autonomous fiefdom," Kissel added.