

# Prison Task Force Wants Changes at Northern

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) - A state task force will vote next month on whether to recommend using the maximum-security Northern Correctional Institution in Somers exclusively for inmates with behavior problems, under a plan to reduce assaults on staff.

But a state Correction Department official said Tuesday that he opposes such a recommendation, saying the agency needs to house dangerous gang members at the facility as well.

There are about 580 inmates at Northern, including 160 who are part of a behavior management program known as administrative segregation. About 240 to 300 are gang members, said Wayne T. Choinski, the department's northern district administrator.

"We're adamantly opposed to removing the gang members from Northern," said Choinski, adding that those inmates are often the most dangerous and influential in the prison system.

"We would absolutely not want to integrate those populations," said Choinski, when asked if the gang members could be moved to other prisons.

The state correctional officers' union wants lawmakers to examine issues such as staff-to-inmate ratios, the need to fill vacant positions and the Northern program. Union officials claim there has been an uptick in prison crowding and violent assaults since the 2007 home invasion in Cheshire that killed three people.

In the wake of the killings, the state put a temporary hold on inmates being released on parole.

According to a draft report from the task force, in fiscal year 2008 there were 44 more reported inmate-on-staff assaults than in 2007, 65 more than in 2006 and 43 more than in 2005.

On July 10, an inmate at Enfield Correctional Institution assaulted two officers, leaving one with a broken eye socket, nose and cheek bone and the other with back and leg injuries.

The day before, an inmate at Corrigan-Radgowski Correctional Institution in Montville was charged with attempted murder after allegedly attacking two officers with a homemade shank.

One officer was stabbed in the neck and suffered a split lip and injured knee, according to union officials. The other officer had a finger dislocated and suffered mouth and lip injuries.

Union leaders with AFSCME Council 4 said the inmate, Bobby Beale, had twice been sent to the behavior management program at Northern. But they believe inmates are being rushed through the program because of crowded conditions.

"Northern was originally established to serve as a deterrent for inmates who assault staff," said Rep. Karen Jarmoc, D-Enfield, chairwoman of the task force. "The concern has been ... it's no longer serving as the deterrent as it once did."

The task force was created by state House Speaker James Amann in July. The panel is set to meet next month to vote on a final report to the General Assembly, which convenes in January.

Other recommendations include reviewing the effectiveness of the state's point system that penalizes problem inmates. Some task force members believe the system does not accurately characterize the seriousness of inmate assaults on staff.

Choinski said the agency is examining the issue internally and will likely have a report in less than six months. But Sen. John Kissel, R-Enfield, said such a long process is "not satisfactory."

Kissel, whose district includes some state prisons, said he senses that DOC believes the legislature is "meddling" with the agency, but that lawmakers have the responsibility to represent the concerns of their constituents, including correction officers concerned about the assaults.

"We've the ones who take the heat if violence erupts in one of these facilities," Kissel said. "The legislature is an equal partner with the executive and judicial branch and we have every right to make these inquiries."

