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## **State Plans To Close Enfield Prison Later This Year; Fourth Prison Closing In Less Than Two Years**

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HARTFORD —

Faced with deep budget cuts and a declining prison population, the state plans to close the medium-security Enfield Correctional Institution — the fourth prison it will close in less than two years.

The decision to shutter the prison by Oct. 1 was driven by the immediate need to save \$70 million, which translates into the elimination of about 1,200 positions in the prison system, said Michael P. Lawlor, a former Democratic state legislator who is now Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's criminal justice czar.

The Enfield prison is a key part of that budget-cutting plan.

"The big picture is this: All the agencies have to make significant cuts," Lawlor said Friday.

The plan is being enacted because state employees turned down a four-year, no-layoff deal that included a two-year wage freeze and changes in the employees' health care and pension benefits. The prison guards were among the most outspoken in their opposition to the deal, which was struck by union leaders and the Malloy administration.

Enfield would be the fourth prison to close in less than two years, an action that would have been unthinkable during the 1990s, when the prison population was growing under the get-tough-on-crime tenure of Republican Gov. John G. Rowland. The state had been in a building boom — steadily opening new prisons, including the "super max" facility in Somers for the state's most violent criminals.

In a sharp reversal from those days, the prisons are now closing. The Webster Correctional Institution in Cheshire was closed in January 2010 under Gov. M. Jodi Rell, and the Gates Correctional Institution in Niantic was shut down on June 1 of this year. The Bergin Correctional Institution in Mansfield is scheduled to close in early August, and Enfield would be shut in October.

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While the immediate plans are budget-driven, they would not be possible without the decline in the prison population to its lowest level in about 10 years.

"The reason Bergin was chosen is that's the easiest prison to close quickly," Lawlor said. "They need to lay people off as soon as possible to get these savings."

Bergin is filled with low-risk inmates who are at the end of their sentences, as well as those who have been convicted of multiple drunken driving offenses. In all the prison closings, officials stressed that the inmates would be switched to other prisons around the state rather than being let out of jail early.

The state is moving forward with the Bergin plans, and layoff notices already have gone out to workers there. Lawlor said he could not predict whether the Bergin and Enfield prisons would remain open if the state employees reverse their position and approve the full \$1.6 billion savings and concession deal with Malloy.

"I can't answer that. I don't know," he said. "Anything can happen."

### **Cheshire's 'North Block'**

Of Enfield's 713 inmates, about half would be reassigned to various prisons. In addition, about 350 criminals would be switched to Cheshire Correctional Institution's infamous "north block," which has been empty for about 15 years.

"It was held in reserve in case of an emergency, like a fire or a riot, in which inmates could go overnight," Lawlor said of the block. "It's like 100 years old, but it has been renovated. It's not the modern style of prison, but it can safely accommodate 350 inmates. It's not ideal, but it's safe. It can be done."

The "north block" became controversial when some prison guards said inmates should have been sent there during the years when inmates were being transferred out of state by Rowland. In addition, some said that the north block should have been opened after the prison population increased sharply following the July 2007 triple murder at the Cheshire home of Dr. William Petit Jr. and his family.

In the past, the town of Cheshire and some local officials have opposed the opening of the north block, partly because of the expected drain on the town's sewer capacity. The prison already was using roughly 450,000 gallons of waste water daily in 2008, and the expansion would only add to that.

Despite the controversy and differing viewpoints on the reopening, the state quietly moved ahead with a major renovation of the vacant wing of the Cheshire prison, spending \$12.4 million to improve the oldest section of a structure that was built by a chain gang in the early 1900s. It is now air-conditioned.

Lawlor said that the additional inmates will remain within the walls of the current complex, and that there would be no immediate impact on local residents.

"You probably wouldn't notice a difference," he said. "It's safe to do this."

The closures are possible because of a drop of about 2,300 Connecticut inmates over the past three years. The population peaked at 19,900 in February 2008 after Rell froze the parole system following the Cheshire murders. That total dropped to 17,450 inmates less than two months ago, and it is now 17,600 with the traditional increase in crime in the summer months, Lawlor said.

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To reach the savings of \$70 million that is needed to help balance the state budget, prison officials will take several steps. First, they would eliminate about 600 positions now vacant. Second, they would lay off about 400 state employees. Third, they would save the equivalent of about 200 positions by cutting overtime by about \$10 million. That would be done by making changes in the vacation schedules.

Large numbers of prison guards now take vacations around holidays such as Christmas. Other guards are eligible for large amounts of overtime to fill in for their vacationing colleagues. The vacation policies would be somewhat restricted, although senior guards would still have the first choice on when they can take their vacations.

### **Senator: Not Good News**

Once known as the Osborn Prison Farm, the Enfield prison was completed in July 1960. In 1987, the prison population rose from 420 to 724. In 1991, prison security went from Level 3 to Level 4, before dropping back to Level 3 in 1993. Level 5 is maximum security, and relatively few inmates are in that category.

Sen. John Kissel, an Enfield Republican who has six prisons in his senatorial district, said the Enfield prison was particularly well known for its counseling programs and a fatherhood initiative that helped prepare the inmates for returning to the streets and becoming productive citizens.

He said the layoffs also will not help the economy.

"To throw new correctional officers and counselors onto the unemployment rolls is not good news for the state of Connecticut," Kissel said in an interview. "These layoffs will disproportionately impact young state employees and young families. ... Dollars are driving this process. Not public safety. Not security. It would be foolish to close these facilities and take them apart because we may need them" if crime rises in the future.

Kissel said he does not want to return to the type of conditions that led to a major riot at the Carl Robinson prison in July 1994, resulting in the death of two inmates. The prisoners had taken over the prison, and Kissel watched the riot from outside the walls with former prosecutor John Bailey.

"We have correction officers and staff who remember those days, and no one wants to go back to those days," Kissel said. "I never want to see that happen."

Closing a prison traditionally is a sensitive issue because it raises potential questions of safety for the inmates and a reshuffling of prison guards. Lawlor said closing prisons is part of a national trend as the number of inmates has decreased. Governors in California, Texas, and Kansas have moved to close prisons, and New York state has shut down prisons in recent years.

Malloy's plans for as many as 6,500 layoffs of state employees and the prison closings represent a stunning turnaround from only six weeks ago when Malloy, legislators and top union officials assumed that the rank-and-file state employees would approve the four-year, no-layoff deal. Some legislators said it was a sweetheart deal that would have been approved immediately by workers in the private sector who have faced layoffs, pay cuts and frozen pensions in recent years.

The largest hit, in raw numbers, went to the Department of Correction, with a reduction of more than 1,000 positions. The prison guards voted sharply against Malloy's concessions plans, but both Malloy and his advisers said flatly that the layoffs would not be targeted at the unions that rejected the deal.

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Administration officials were asked multiple times whether the unions that shot down the deal, which turned out to be four, would receive the most layoffs. Each time, they said "no."

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