

Union claims decision already made on prison

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By Luther Turmelle, North Bureau Chief

CHESHIRE — Leaders of the union representing corrections officers at the Webster Correctional Institution said Tuesday that a decision has already been made to close the facility, despite claims to the contrary by state officials.

Moises Padilla, vice president of Local 387 of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, said human resources officials with the state Department of Correction will be meeting today with union members who work at the Jarvis Street facility. The purpose of the visit, he said, is to begin providing details of how the process of closing the facility would play out.

Brian Garnett, a DOC spokesman, was not available for comment Tuesday concerning Padilla's claim that the decision to close the facility has already been made. Rich Harris, a spokesman for Gov. M. Jodi Rell, said he had "not heard anything about a decision."

Rell ordered the DOC last month to investigate the feasibility of closing correctional facilities because of a 1,600-inmate decline in the prison population statewide. The closing of Webster Correctional Institution is projected to save the state \$3.4 million annually.

Padilla said the union is opposed to the closing of the facility because it will have a ripple effect at other DOC facilities that will put corrections officers at risk. DOC officials said last week, when they announced that the agency had recommended closing the facility, that the 220 inmates there would be moved to other minimum-security prisons in the state as well as other higher-security facilities if necessary.

"It's a shell game," Padilla said. "The Level 2 facilities are already over-crowded, so they (inmates currently at Webster) won't necessarily end up there."

Padilla said those prisons that are overcrowded use space that is not designed to house inmates, like offices and closets.

"They can't have inmates sleep on the floor, so they put mattresses on what corrections officers call 'banana boats' — temporary plastic cots that have no legs or frames," he said. "Conditions like that are ultimately going to put corrections officers' safety at risk."

There are about 120 staff members at Webster Correctional Institution, although not all of them are corrections officers. It is expected to take eight to 10 weeks to close the Jarvis Street facility, which opened in 1990.

Rell ordered acting corrections Commissioner Brian Murphy to review the feasibility of consolidating some facilities as a response to the state's burgeoning deficit.

The state prison population is about 18,300, down from nearly 19,900 in February 2008. The DOC has closed two of the four housing units at Webster over the past year.

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