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Union chief says prison closure would cause problems

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HARTFORD — Closing one state prison in an already overcrowded system would cause a host of problems for guards, inmates, and their families, the head of the correction officers union said.

Jon T. Pepe, president of the Connecticut State Prison Employees Union, also said in an interview Tuesday that he fears a closure would escalate overtime costs and eat into much of the potential savings.

"We're going to do everything we can to make things safe under any circumstances," said Pepe, whose union represents 1,900 guards, treatment officers, counselors, and maintenance workers. "But I don't see closing a prison now as creating the best environment."

Gov. M. Jodi Rell last week directed Department of Correction Commissioner Brian K. Murphy to explore the possibility of closing one of the state's 18 prisons, citing both a declining inmate population and a growing state budget deficit.

The prison population, which had peaked at about 19,900 in February 2008, has declined steadily since then to 18,500, due in part to expanded re-entry programs.

Rell and lawmakers also overhauled the parole process in late 2008 and early 2009. That overhaul included establishment of an expanded Board of Pardons and Paroles with five full-time members with professional experience in criminal justice or psychology. That has enabled the board to more closely review parole cases without slowing down processing of the overall caseload.

But while a detailed analysis of prison capacity never has been presented to the legislature, lawmakers frequently have said in recent years that the system was designed to house about 17,000 inmates.

Connecticut prisons now have about 1,700 inmates assigned across various facilities to temporary beds in nonresidential areas, such as program space. Pepe said closing another facility, even a low-security site, simply will force the reassignment of inmates into other areas where the limits already are being tested.

And the strain wouldn't just involve sleeping space, but everything from toilets and other facilities to counseling, treatment, and other support services, he said.

According to the union, the recent retirement incentive program and an ongoing state hiring freeze, coupled with attrition, have combined to lower guard ranks by about 400 posts. A new class of correction officers just added about 125 people to the ranks, but staffing remains tight, he said.

"I'm sure there would be some savings" if one prison is closed, but with many key positions already vacant, more overtime assignments likely would be needed, Pepe said. "I don't know how long that savings would last."

The prison guard just was one of just two state employee unions that refused to provide wage concessions, such as canceling raises or accepting furlough days, during negotiations last spring with the Rell administration. That means its members aren't exempt from layoffs.

"I would hope nobody would play with people's lives" to exact some political payback, Pepe said. "I can't see layoffs working well."

This fiscal year's \$18.64 billion state budget is running \$624 million in deficit according to Comptroller Nancy Wyman.

Democrats, who control both the state House and the Senate, had argued last spring that state government could achieve big savings within its prison system.

One budget bill adopted by lawmakers yet vetoed by Rell last summer would have closed two prisons. The estimated annual savings by 2010-11 was about \$10 million.

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