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Prisons playing numbers game

By: Jesse Buchanan, Record-Journal staff

CHESHIRE - The state Department of Correction is moving prisoners among prisons and shutting down empty prison dormitories to reduce costs. After a suspension of paroles for violent offenders in 2007, the prison system saw a spike in inmates but is now returning to pre-suspension levels.

A dormitory of Webster Correctional Institution on Jarvis Street was emptied of its 104 prisoners two weeks ago, but correction officers' union officials say there are few other places to put these inmates without crowding.

The department is trying save money in the face of the state budget crisis, according to department spokesman Brian Garnett. The department has gone \$16.2 million over budget in the past and current fiscal year combined.

"We are scouring the system looking for any consolidations or efficiencies we can make," he said. "We're trying to find ways to consolidate population."

Webster is a minimum-security prison that houses more than 400 adult men in three dormitories that are still open.

Moving inmates from Webster to other facilities allows the closing of one of Webster's four dormitories, saving energy, labor and operating costs. Garnett said he did not have an estimate of how much money is saved by closing a housing unit.

This was not the first step to closing Webster entirely, according to Garnett.

"There are no plans to close a facility," he said.

Moises Padilla, an executive board member of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 387 and a corrections officer at Manson Youth Institution, said there is still an overcrowding problem among minimum security prisons such as Webster.

About 170 inmates at Bergin Correctional Institution in Storrs and Willard-Cybulski Correctional Institution in Enfield have to sleep in temporary cots because of the lack of beds, according to a Department of Correction facility count list.

"We went from an overcrowding scenario to closing down units," Padilla said.

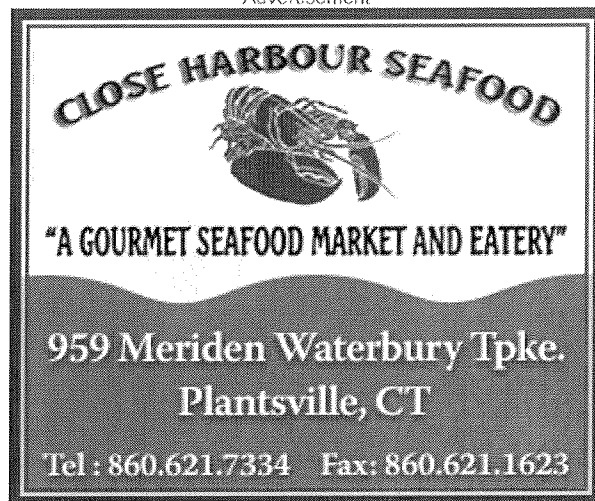
However, there are more than 400 empty beds at Webster and Gates Correctional Institution in Niantic.

Following the Petit triple-killing in Cheshire in 2007, Gov. M. Jodi Rell suspended all paroles for violent offenders. The two suspects in the Petit killings, Joshua Komisarjevsky and Steven Hayes, had both recently been out on parole when the incident took place.

In July of 2008, Webster, Bergin and Willard-Cybulski all had more inmates than beds, while Gates had five free beds. "As a result of the suspension of parole, we hit an all-time high as far as population," Garnett said.

Rell allowed paroles for violent offenders again in 2008, which helped relieve the pressure on the prison system, according to Garnett.

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It took about a year from the reinstatement of paroles to restore the parole system to where it was before the Petit incident, Garnett said. The inmate population throughout the state has decreased by about 1,000 inmates since February 2008.

"Obviously, the folks who need to be incarcerated are still incarcerated," Garnett said.

State Office of Policy and Management spokesman Jeffrey Beckham said the suspension of parole helped push prison costs over their estimated level. Parole suspension was an unexpected expense for budget planners.

"This represents a deficit from a projection two years ago about what they'd need," he said.

The proposed department budget for fiscal year is \$712 million, according to Beckham.

The payment in lieu of taxes money that Cheshire receives from the state for the prisons is based on property taxes and will not be affected by the population of the prisons.

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