

Opinion: Views & commentary from around the community

Change Is Coming

By Matthew Hattley



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The current NY State prison system is in for some reform. Memos are being issued on a monthly basis changing the status quo in the hopes of making the prison system safer.

According to an internal memorandum dated February 16, 2016, "Effective Wednesday February 17, 2016, inmates will not be allowed to receive hooded sweatshirts through the facility package room." Also, "Effective Wednesday, June 1, 2016, inmates will no longer be allowed to possess any hooded sweatshirt." Further, "Inmates found in possession of these items after the June 1, 2016, deadline for disposal will have the items confiscated and will be subject to disciplinary action."

The Department of Corrections and Community Service also intends to cut out the use of canned goods in the prison commissaries throughout the state; new items will be offered to the prison population sealed in plastic or foil pouches. This will be implemented in hopes that the number of cuttings/slashing will decrease, by denying individuals access to sharp metal lids that can be turned into weapons.

Looking at the situation realistically, disallowing hooded sweatshirts and removing cans from the commissary will not make a significant difference, specifically where personal safety is concerned. If a person is determined to cause someone else physical harm, there really is not much that can be done to stop it, either here or on the streets.

Our state issued identification card could easily be altered to be just as dangerous as the lid off a can. A simple sock plus two or three bars of soap can do significant damage to the human body. Plus you have to take into consideration that most NY state prisons were built over 100 years ago, meaning there will always be something available which could possibly be used as a weapon. A simple fact.

A couple of other things the DOCCS is considering are the use of pepper spray to breakup physical altercations, and portable metal detectors to better assist the security staff in locating hidden razors and homemade knives.

Where the pepper spray is concerned, do you really want to release something like that inside a facility that is not adequately ventilated? Then you have the problem of abusive staff members to consider. Everyone remembers the incident at Fishkill Correctional last year, where a number of security staff beat an incarcerated individual to death. The staff claimed said individual was on drugs and out of control. However, toxicology tests proved that he was not on any drugs. Pepper spray would only be another means to abuse the population without any real repercussions. In essence this could cause a lot more harm than any good.

Furthermore, NY prisons have been operating for over 100 years without pepper spray. Violence inside the prisons has actually decreased over the past 20 years while I've been incarcerated. So this begs the question — why now? Why implement a harmful and potentially deadly method of restraint without any real justification for it?

Currently, ever facility already has numerous walk through metal detectors as well as various portable metal detectors. Purchasing more hand-held devices seems like it would only affect the taxpayers' collective wallet, rather than violence in prison. Furthermore, in a medium security facility like Woodbourne, where the physical violence is almost non-existent, other measures are needed. Specifically where most of the violent incidents are mere "fist fights" — with no weapons involved- — additional hand held metal detectors will accomplish nothing.

Plus, every facility is its own entity. There is no "one size fits all" approach, even though the state continuously implements this strategy. Every facility must be operated independently according to its needs. There also must be a clear differential between the medium and maximum security facilities. No medium should be operated like a maxi. The mediums should only concentrate on preparing the population for their return to society, since most will be released within six years or less.

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