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NYSCOPBA Presses Legislators for Action as Violence, Contraband Continue to Plague New York State Prisons

ALBANY, N.Y. — The New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association is calling on Governor Cuomo and the leadership in the State Assembly to enact measures to reduce the incidents of violence and contraband in the state prison system. NYSCOPBA urges the governor to repair and reintroduce DOCCS' failed attempt of implementing a secure vendor packaging program; and for the Assembly to pass legislation that will crackdown on contraband entering New York's correctional facilities.

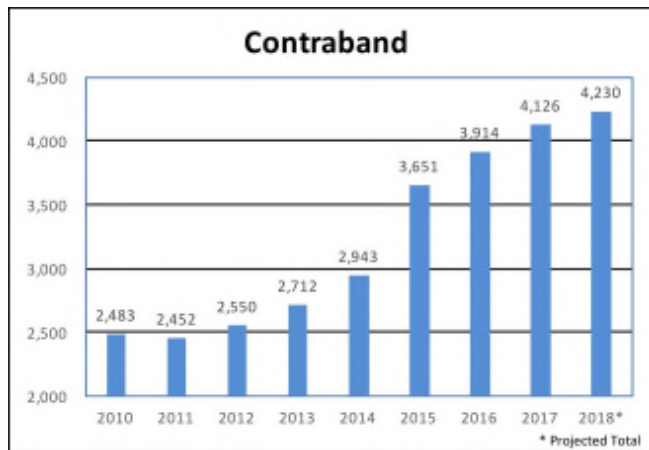
Following the continued rise of violence and instances of drugs and weapons making their way inside state prison facilities, NYSCOPBA will continue to press for legislation (S.7582A/A.9885), introduced by New York State Senator Pamela Helming (R-Auburn) and Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner (D-Round Lake), that would require the DOCCS commissioner to establish a contraband screen plan in correctional facilities that would include random selection and search of visitors and vehicles entering a facility's grounds, use of leashed and controlled canines at entrances and electronic, image, physical and visual searches of visitors entering facilities. The bill would also require the DOCCS commissioner to provide the Legislature with an annual report summarizing the current plan and the results of the prior year's plan. The bill passed the Senate (57-4) and is currently referred to the Assembly Corrections committee.

Incidents such as the recent multi-day lockdown at Auburn Correction Facility should be sounding the alarm to the dangers corrections officers and inmates face every day. These environments will continue to deteriorate until action is taken to pass comprehensive contraband screening measures.

The Auburn lockdown, which NYSCOPBA requested and DOCCS initiated on April 19, followed a large fight involving approximately 20 inmates. Officers seized more than 15 weapons in subsequent searches. That same day, an inmate was sent to the hospital with multiple stab wounds to the head and neck from a separate incident. Officers found more than two dozen weapons following more violent incidents in subsequent days, including ceramic scalpel blades which are undetected by metal detectors. The lockdown was lifted April 27.

In another incident last week at the Great Meadow Correctional Facility in Comstock, a 20-inmate fight resulted in injuries to several inmates and the recovery of four makeshift weapons. One inmate was sent to the hospital for injuries to the head and ears.

2018 data collected by DOCCS on contraband seizures shows numbers that are projected to top those of last year, which had the highest total since data began being collected in 2007 (**right**). A year-to-date comparison on inmate-on-staff and inmate-on-inmate assaults in 2017 and 2018 show these numbers are increasing as well (**below**). As violent incidents increase, correction officers are limited in the disciplinary measure they can enforce, due to a DOCCS court settlement with the New York Civil Liberties Union, a settlement that NYSCOPBA continues to oppose.



“The continued introduction of drugs and weapons is making the working and living environments inside our facilities potentially deadly for inmates and staff,” said Michael Powers, president, NYSCOPBA. “Current policies on contraband screening fall short, and recent efforts by DOCCS to introduce new policies, like the Secure Vendor Pilot Program, have failed. NYSCOPBA is encouraged by this legislation introduced by Senator Helming and Assemblymember Woerner in the effort to bring about critically needed changes to the current system and in turn making our facilities safer for everyone. We need change now in order to save the lives of our members and the inmates in their care and custody.”

“The recent violence that led to a lockdown at Auburn Correctional Facility demonstrates just how difficult a job our corrections officers have,” said Sen. Helming, who serves as Vice-Chair of the Senate Committee on Crime, Crime Victims and Corrections. “More and more, contraband such as weapons and drugs are finding their way into facilities, posing great risks to our brave corrections officers. As State Senator, I will continue to push for funding and measures that give our officers the tools they need ensure a safe environment for everyone. I stand by our corrections officers and urge the Governor and Assembly Majority to do the same by supporting my legislation to require the Commissioner of DOCCS to establish a new visitor contraband screening plan in state correctional facilities.”

The Secure Vendor Pilot Program, which went into effect last year and was later rescinded by Gov. Cuomo following complaints from inmates’ rights advocates, was seen as a positive and much-needed change by correctional officers. This program allowed for the families of inmates to purchase items through these vendors, a preferred way of providing packages to the inmate population. NYSCOPBA has remained open to working with DOCCS in re-evaluating this program to address the concerns raised.

“Often, correctional officers do not get the recognition they deserve for the exceptional work they do on daily basis in a dangerous environment,” said Powers. “The overwhelming majority of officers serve with professionalism and integrity inside our state prisons and serve as excellent role models in the community. It is past time that lawmakers provide the right tools they need to secure their facilities and safeguard inmates and colleagues.”

