



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Reform Needed At New York Juvenile Prisons

JAMES L. SEWARD May 27, 2010

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As New York continues to deal with an unprecedented fiscal crisis, every dollar expended by the state should come under careful scrutiny. We must ensure funds are being spent wisely for needed programs that are widely beneficial. It is also vital that we examine the policymakers, and make certain they are of superior character as well. Case in point – New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) Commissioner Gladys Carrion.

Recently, I joined with a number of my senate colleagues in calling for Commissioner Carrion's immediate resignation due to a long list of unsafe and unwise policies that have cast our juvenile justice system in New York in an extremely negative light. The commissioner has endorsed rules that have endangered staff members, other inmates and the community at large.

There are reports of violent youths being released prematurely into less secure settings where they have murdered and viciously assaulted community members, and of numerous attacks by youth against OCFS staffers who work at state-run facilities. The behavior is deplorable, and the lack of action by the commissioner is unacceptable.

For example, last June an employee at a community youth home in Lockport was brutally beaten to death by two teenage residents who had been prematurely released from more secure state facilities.

In February 2009, a Rochester police officer was shot in the head by a juvenile who was AWOL from a private residential community placement.

A worker at the state-operated Tryon Residential Center in Johnstown suffered a stroke and died a month later after he was struck in the head with a wooden club by a youth. Months after the incident, several employees sought out and obtained orders of protection so they could come to work.

One of the more recent incidents took place at Goshen Secure Center in Orange County on December 12, 2009. According to reports, girls as young as 15 were transported into the prison to attend a dance with convicted killers and other dangerous criminals. A lap dance was videotaped by a surveillance camera and other sexual acts possibly were committed.

One prison employee, Tony Collado, said that he was ordered to drive two women invited to the dance in a state car from a street corner in Albany to Goshen and back -- a distance of 230 miles round trip. I met the courageous whistleblower, Collado, at a recent press conference where he spoke out against the decaying system.

“My complaints to the higher-ups about what happened at this dance were ignored. Things are spinning out of control at Goshen and I know other facilities are having similar problems. I've been hit with phone receivers, punched in the face on numerous occasions and some of my fellow workers have been on the opposite end of much worse. What happened at this dance was the last straw and I felt that coming forward was the right thing to do. Both the staff and residents should not be exposed to this type of stuff,” said Mr. Collado.

A special legislative task force on reform of the New York state juvenile justice system recently uncovered a number of incidents at facilities around the state demonstrating an emerging trend in relation to violent youths and residential services. The task force was formed to address a growing concern by community members, youth facility staff, and law enforcement officials who cited the closure of 14 youth facilities and reporting centers throughout the state, along with newly-implemented policies set forth by OCFS, as the reason for a spike in youth violence.

Innocent people who work at these facilities are losing their jobs, and worse yet, suffering serious injuries. Catering to violent criminals seems to be more in vogue than protecting staff members and taxpayers. The system must be reformed, and that reform needs to start at the top with the resignation of Commissioner Carrion whose failed policies have ruined more lives than they have helped.

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