



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Catharine Young

Senator Young Tours Medium Security Correctional Facilities in Western New York

CATHARINE YOUNG December 11, 2018

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Gowanda, NY – Following tours of two medium security correctional facilities in Western New York last week, Senator Catharine Young (R,C,I-57th District) expressed concern about the growing trend of inmate violence against correction officers and prison staff. According to a recent report issued by the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), inmate-on-staff assaults have risen by nearly 40 percent in the past five years.

Senator Young visited Gowanda and Collins Correctional Facilities, which are located next to each other in southern Erie County. Gowanda Correctional Facility houses more than 2,300 inmates and is the second-largest prison in New York State. Collins Correctional Facility houses 1,700 inmates.

“The job of a corrections officer is one of the most difficult, yet vital, in public service. We rely on them to keep us safe by maintaining order within our prisons among an inmate population that includes some of the most dangerous individuals in society – violent gang members, murderers, rapists and other criminals,” said Senator Young.

“An already-hard job has become even more onerous as these dedicated officers and prison staff are being increasingly subjected to violence perpetrated by inmates. Last year, prison violence reached a record level. By all indications, 2018 statistics will be even higher.”

“I have spoken with prison personnel who feel genuinely threatened by their current working conditions,” she continued.

“Much of the increase in violence stems from the changes in inmate disciplinary practices that were instituted following the New York Civil Liberties Union lawsuit and settlement with New York State. Now, the sanctions for aggression are weaker than ever before. Prisoners are fully aware of those changes and have less incentive to curb their behavior.”

“It has also emboldened them to break other rules including those prohibiting contraband items such as small blades and illegal drugs such as synthetic marijuana, which can be smuggled in by family and visitors, often undetected.”

“There was a very promising effort to control contraband coming into prisons. The state initiated two pilot programs that required families to purchase goods for inmates from an in-prison central commissary rather than bringing in packages from the outside. Results showed that it was effective. Incomprehensibly, the programs were suspended by the administration.”

“This combination of growing violence and contraband has meant that staff is increasingly stretched thin. They simply do not have the resources they need to assure the facility is as safe as it should be for staff and inmates.”

Senator Young pointed to recent instances where inmate assaults resulted in injuries:

- February 2018, Rikers Island: a gang-affiliated inmate, angry that an officer had cited him for an infraction, launched a vicious attack on the officer, kicking and pummeling him repeatedly with the help of four other inmates. The corrections officer was hospitalized with a fractured neck and bleeding on the right side of his brain.
- August 2018, Sing Sing: an inmate being escorted to his cell charged at the officer as another inmate in a nearby cell grabbed the guard's shirt and pulled him into the cell bars. The first prisoner cut the back of the officer's head with a makeshift cutting weapon. The guard was admitted to Westchester Medical Center for a laceration to the head and an injury to his lower back. The next day a second inmate attack occurred at Sing Sing by an individual using a broom handle and a razor as weapons. Two officers sustained minor injuries.
- November 2018, Clinton Correctional: an inmate was stabbed during a fight in the prison tailor shop and hospitalized. Officers found a broken tailor shop pick that had been used as the weapon.

“The Senate fought for and secured an additional \$1 million in the 2018-19 budget for prison safety initiatives including body cams, K-9 units and pepper spray, which are important tools in combatting this problem. We also passed legislation, now law, permitting the use of TSA body image scanner devices in correctional facilities to help detect concealed weapons.”

“However, the magnitude of the problem means that more needs to be done. The men and women who work in our prisons are more vulnerable than ever before. Their health and safety, and that of other inmates, must be priorities. As we approach the 2019 Legislative Session I will be advancing legislation toward that end and hope that my colleagues will commit to tackling this issue.”

