



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

## O'Mara calls for crackdown on prison contraband, co-sponsors measure taking additional steps to respond to rising violence in state prisons

THOMAS F. O'MARA January 30, 2020

| ISSUE: **PRISON SAFETY**



We must take every step to protect correction officers, prison staff, inmates, and overall safety and security within the walls of our prisons.

**Albany, N.Y., January 28**—State Senator Tom O'Mara (R,C,I-Big Flats) is co-sponsoring legislation in the Senate to require the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) to establish a multi-faceted “Contraband Screening Plan” in New York’s

correctional facilities.

O'Mara is joining his Finger Lakes colleague, Senator Pamela Helming (R,C,I-Canandaigua), in sponsoring the measure (**S162**) to improve prison safety. The legislation is currently in the Senate Crime Victims, Crime and Correction Committee. The legislation is sponsored in the Assembly by area Assemblymen Phil Palmesano (R,C,I-Corning) and Chris Friend (R,C,I-Big Flats), and has been referred to the Assembly Correction Committee.

“We must take every step to protect correction officers, prison staff, inmates, and overall safety and security within the walls of our prisons. This must include an action plan to cut down on the dangerous drugs, weapons, and other contraband finding its way into our correctional facilities and contributing to a rise in violence. Our correction officers are extremely concerned about rising violence and I share that concern,” said O'Mara, pointing to a **recent attack at the Elmira Correctional Facility** where an inmate used a makeshift weapon to slash a correction officer and several other officers were injured trying to restrain the attacker.

The latest attack follows other violent incidents at the Elmira facility, and at numerous other state prisons, over the past few years.

Following the recent attack at the Elmira Correctional Facility, Mark Deburgomaster, Western Regional Vice President for the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA), told *WETM News* in Elmira, “Makeshift weapons and drugs have been a constant problem at Elmira Correctional Facility. As inmate advocates continue to call for reduced disciplinary measures, our staff continue to be the subject of unprovoked attacks. This was an attack by an inmate who has a history of violence and we are thankful that all the officers injured were not seriously hurt. This is exactly why significant disciplinary measures need to exist to deter this type of behavior. Without them,

it exposes staff and other inmates to potentially dangerous situations at the hands of inmates who realize there are no repercussions for violent behavior.”

O’Mara noted that NYSCOPBA has renewed its call for stepped-up efforts to cut down on drugs, weapons, and other dangerous contraband being smuggled into New York’s correctional facilities. The union is also warning that a provision contained in Governor Andrew Cuomo’s 2020-2021 proposed state budget would give the governor the authority to close additional state prisons, a move that NYSCOPBA believes would lead to additional prison overcrowding and increased violence.

**According to NYSCOPBA**, violence in state prisons is currently at an all-time high and closing additional prisons will only lead to more overcrowding and more dangerous conditions for officers and other prison employees.

More than 80 percent of inmates housed in maximum security facilities are convicted of violent felony offenses, NYSCOPBA notes. Last year, according to the union, incidents of inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assaults were the highest ever reported by DOCCS.

Fifteen state prisons have been shut down under the Cuomo administration to date.

NYSCOPBA supports the legislation O’Mara co-sponsors, which calls for DOCCS to put forth a comprehensive “Contraband Screening Plan” that would include:

- > Pat frisks and visual searches of visitors to correctional facilities;
- > The random selection and search of visitors’ vehicles;
- > The use of a controlled K-9 search at the entrance of every state prison;
- > Electronic imaging scanning; and

> Enhanced staff training on up-to-date contraband screening procedures.