



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of June 7, 2021 ~ 'Pro-criminal policies reaching right inside prison walls'

THOMAS F. O'MARA June 7, 2021

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In a state government under one-party control -- with a governor weakened by scandal -- New York's current far-left leadership is equally emboldened to keep moving in the wrong direction on criminal justice and corrections, and law and order.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and

policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "Pro-criminal policies reaching right inside prison walls"

The New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association, Inc. (NYSCOPBA) has been issuing a steady drumbeat of reports of attacks by inmates on correctional officers and other prison staff at the Elmira Correctional Facility in our region, as well as at other state prisons across New York.

Taken together, these constant NYSCOPBA bulletins warn of a building powder keg within prison walls.

NYSCOPBA has noted that more than 80 percent of inmates housed in maximum security facilities like Elmira are convicted of violent felony offenses. Incidents of inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assaults have been at some of the highest-ever levels over the past few years.

For me and other like-minded legislators, these NYSCOPBA reports have continued to highlight the need for Governor Andrew Cuomo and the Democratic leaders of the State Legislature to address the rising violence inside state prisons.

Instead of addressing it, however, they keep moving in directions that can only make it worse.

In fact, Governor Cuomo and the Legislature's Democratic supermajorities have been solely focused on coddling inmates by severely hampering disciplinary sanctions, finding ways to parole more and more inmates, and diminishing the ability of correctional officers to deal with violence inside prisons.

Ongoing attacks inside the Elmira Correctional Facility and many of the state's other prisons should serve as a stark reminder that steps are needed to better protect correctional officers, prison staff, inmates themselves, and prison safety and security overall. We should be working to enact a revitalized 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.

For example, I continue to co-sponsor legislation (S2594) to require the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) to establish a multi-faceted "Contraband Screening Plan" for New York's correctional facilities. Unfortunately, our current legislative leaders won't be bringing this specific legislation to the floor of the Senate or Assembly for a vote anytime soon. They are, however, as I recently highlighted in this column, likely to advance so-called "parole

reform” legislation that will make it easier for the state Parole Board to release violent inmates back into society.

In other words, we are facing the continuation and expansion of a pro-criminal mentality at the highest levels of New York State government – and, consequently, the ongoing erosion of law and order in so many of our communities.

It has consequences on our streets and within our neighborhoods. Not only that, the threat posed by an emboldened criminal element clearly carries right inside our prison walls.

New York State correctional officers are extremely concerned about rising violence inside prisons. I have long shared their concern. In a state government under one-party control -- with a governor weakened by scandal – New York’s current far-left leadership is equally emboldened to keep moving in the wrong direction on criminal justice and corrections, and law and order. It’s a carefree approach, and it’s irresponsible and dangerous.

Most recently, for instance, the Legislature approved and Governor Cuomo signed into law a measure I strongly opposed to strictly limit the use of solitary confinement in New York’s correctional facilities. The governor signed the new law despite noting in his own approval message that it will need to be amended in order to protect officers and other prison staff from violent inmates.

NYSCOPBA Western Region Vice President Mark Deburgomaster said, “It has become a broken record of sorts reporting weekly on staff being attacked by inmates. The reality is, until the disciplinary system is strengthened, we will continue to bring to light the assaults that plague our prisons. Eight officers needing hospital treatment at one prison is simply unacceptable. State legislators need to open their eyes to the constant danger our members face and strengthen policies that will help deter these attacks from occurring. This also applies to inmate on inmate assaults...It is simply incomprehensible that our elected officials would sit back and let this violence continue without making meaningful changes that will protect staff and inmates.”

Incomprehensible is one conclusion that can be drawn. It’s also irrational and senseless.

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