



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of November 15, 2021 ~ 'Upending and uprooting the fabric of our communities'

THOMAS F. O'MARA November 15, 2021

| ISSUE: **PRISON CLOSURES**



The bottom line is that Governor Hochul should be focused on spreading out the inmate population, decreasing inmate density, and protecting the men and women working in our prisons.

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, "Upending and uprooting the fabric of our communities"

New York State governors continue to be full of surprises.

Governor Kathy Hochul is the latest.

Early last week, she abruptly announced that the Southport Correctional Facility in the Southern Tier, the Willard Drug Treatment Campus and the Rochester Correctional Facility in the Finger Lakes, two North Country facilities, and a prison in the mid-Hudson Valley are slated to close on March 10, 2022.

Six correctional facilities in total impacting and uprooting more than a thousand state correctional officers and thousands more employees of our state prisons, and their families and communities.

Officials at the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) will call it a cost-cutting action, that the state will look to reopen and repurpose the facilities, and that DOCCS “does not anticipate any layoffs due to these closures.”

While we intend to hold Governor Hochul to her word on all of the above – if we’re unable, first, to convince her that these closures are misguided, dangerous, and should be rescinded – we also know that we’ve heard this recording before from the previous governor. We know that previously closed facilities, including the former Monterey Shock Incarceration Facility in Schuyler County, still sit vacant as local eyesores.

These new, fast-tracked prison shutdowns are just the latest in a long string of prisons that New York State has shuttered over the past decade of a steadily declining prison population – a declining population, especially over the past several years, as the result of so-called “progressive” policies enacted by Democrat governors and legislative majorities that, in the view of many, are pro-criminal, politically driven moves at the irrational and irresponsible expense of public safety and security, and victims’ rights.

In particular in the legislative district I represent, Governor Hochul’s unanticipated and certainly unexpected decision to close the Southport Correctional Facility in Chemung County comes as a great shock to this community and region.

It arrived with no advance warning to any of us and, obviously, no meaningful local input or outreach to local officials or the correctional officers union. It upends hundreds of local correctional officers and prison staff, which means hundreds of local families and a devastating toll on already hard-hit local economies.

Additionally, the shutdown of the Willard Drug Treatment Campus will have yet another, destructive impact on lives and communities throughout the Finger Lakes region. I fully share the concerns of my colleague, Senator Pam Helming, who directly represents the Willard campus, about the wide-ranging consequences this closure will have on employees and the community at large, including on badly needed drug abuse treatment programs and services at such a heightened time of need.

Overall, with this action, state-level government leaders continue to show a disregard, to say the least, for Upstate New York's communities.

Furthermore, it turns a blind eye to an increasingly violent crime wave throughout this state, as well as a currently explosive and dangerous prison environment that threatens correctional officers and prison staff.

In responding to the announcement of the closures, New York State Correctional Officers Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA) President Michael Powers said, "The numbers tell the real story; despite closing over two dozen facilities the past 10 years, violent attacks on our members have doubled and yet nothing is being done to address it. Where is the reinvestment in the facilities to make these prisons safer working environments? My heart goes out to all of the individuals whose lives have been severely impacted by this announcement and know that our organization will hold the department accountable every step of the way. At some point, the State needs to realize that these choices are more than just buildings and tax-saving measures, these are life-altering decisions that upend lives and destroy communities."

In my specific district, Governor Hochul needs to be transparent about her decision to close Southport. What factors justify closing a "supermax" facility like Southport – a place that confines New York's most dangerous and violent inmates? What will it mean for public safety across this state? What measures are being considered for the future of the facility itself, but most importantly for the employees and their families, and the community at large? There are plenty of unanswered questions.

The bottom line is that Governor Hochul should be focused on spreading out the inmate population, decreasing inmate density, and protecting the men and women working in our prisons.

Despite the recent trend of lowering prison population, we have not seen a correlating reduction of violence within the prisons. We read weekly of violent assaults by inmates on staff and other inmates occurring at Elmira Correctional Facility, for example.

We need to focus on safer prisons. The lower prison population should be capitalized on to spread inmates out for greater safety within the system as a whole.

As I noted above, the governor characterizes the closures as a cost-cutting action. The state has recently invested more than \$20 million into operations at the Southport facility implementing a step-down program to work with the most violent inmates in the state's prison system to get them ready for reintegration into the general prison population. How does it make any sense to suddenly close it? That's not cost-cutting, that's simply wasteful.

I have joined numerous lawmakers to highlight the extreme-liberal, radical, dangerous actions of former Governor Andrew Cuomo and the Legislature's downstate-dominated, one-party-control Democrat supermajorities that we believe have focused on emptying state prisons for political gain.

This criticism now continues into the new Hochul administration.

Governor Hochul has, so far, wrongly continued the politically motivated actions of the former Cuomo administration and the Legislature's Democrat supermajorities to empty state prisons at any cost, especially the cost of public safety and security. We have seen and continue to see action after action, from the disastrous bail reform to a radically lenient Parole Board to weakened prison safety, advancing a pro-criminal mentality over public safety and victims' rights.

They will keep on arguing and trying to make some pie-in-the-sky case that the increasing crime rates we see around this state have nothing to do with their actions.

We know better: They have emboldened this society's criminal element and it's impacting all of us.

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