

MCLS Director Opposes Decision to Double Bunk Inmates

State sets record high for inmates: Critics say prison plan is all bunk

by Laura Crimaldi, *Boston Herald*
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Facing its largest inmate population in state history, the Department of Correction is installing bunk beds for the first time at the maximum security Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center in Shirley, the Herald has learned.

The move has ignited an outcry from the correction officers union and prison advocates. They say double bunking at Souza-Baranowski is a security risk and does nothing to address the problem of lower-risk offenders being jailed at higher-security prisons because of a lack of lower-security beds.

“It’s the most dangerous thing to do at a Level 6 maximum security facility,” said Steve Kenneway, president of the Massachusetts Correction Officers Federated Union. The union is to begin bargaining with the DOC over staffing levels required by the double bunking Sept. 16, Kenneway said.

“Right now, Souza-Baranowski is a safe facility that is single bunked. It will be an unsafe facility with tremendous problems when you double bunk it,” said Kenneway.

DOC spokeswoman Diane Wiffin said officials decided to install bunk beds at Souza to address overcrowding created by the record number of state inmates. As of Sept. 1, the DOC had a population of 11,368, a 10 percent increase since 2005, breaking the record of 11,158 inmates set in 1999.

“Overcrowding impacts the safety of our population and staff,” said Wiffin. “There are several potential remedies we are exploring to ease overcrowding. One remedy is double bunking at Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center.”

The 500,000-square-foot prison has 1,024 general-population single cells, 128 special management cells and 24 health service beds, according to the DOC Web site. As of March 31, Souza-Baranowski was operating at 104 percent of its capacity, with 1,063 inmates, according to the DOC’s first quarter overcrowding report. So far, none of the bunk beds that were installed have been put to use, Wiffin said.

MCI-Cedar Junction in Walpole, the state’s other maximum security prison, was operating at 115 percent of its capacity, with 731 inmates, during the first quarter of 2008, DOC data show. The prison was designed to hold no more than 633 inmates. There are no bunk beds in use there, Wiffin said.

Leslie Walker, director of Massachusetts Correctional Legal Services, said double bunking at Souza will worsen security conditions at an already violent prison and require the state to spend more money on staffing. The DOC’s budget for fiscal 2009 is more than \$530 million - a steep increase from last year’s spending plan of \$474 million.

“Double bunking maximum security prisoners is a huge mistake. Double bunking at Souza-Baranowski jams two men in a small cell for 20 hours per day,” Walker said in an e-mail. “This creates an unnecessarily tense, unsafe environment for prisoners and staff in an already tense, violent prison.”

Walker said 16 percent of the state’s prison population is held at maximum security prisons, which is twice the national average. According to a January DOC report to the Legislature, there are 600 inmates housed with higher-risk offenders because of a lack of medium, minimum and pre-release beds for the lower-risk prisoners.

“For nearly two years, the (DOC) has had objective evidence it was overclassified. Yet today Massachusetts still has nearly twice the national average of prisoners in costly high-security prisons and one-half the national average in low-security,” Walker said.

Wiffin said the DOC has added 600 beds at medium, minimum and pre-release facilities since 2005, when the inmate population was 10,338. Adding more beds at those facilities is under consideration.

Wiffin could not provide figures for the number of beds expected to be installed at Souza-Baranowski, saying the “capacity and timeline is still being developed.”

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