

Senator Pam Helming

Representing the 54th New York Senate District



Cuomo's Prison Visit Highlights Need to Pass Contraband Bill

By Senator Pam Helming, 54th District

Governor Andrew Cuomo's recent visit to the Great Meadow Correctional Facility highlights the need to crack down on prison contraband and improve safety. According to media reports, the Governor has indicated he will release a prison reform plan in January. Any "reform plan" needs to address the contraband crisis plaguing our prisons and driving the drug and violence epidemic.

The Governor's visit comes after a 20- to 25-inmate fight that occurred last Wednesday at this state maximum security prison. The facility went into lockdown to quell the violence. Nearly 10 canisters of tear gas had to be used to break up the fighting. According to reports, "multiple weapons were found after the fight." Incidents like this are why we need to adopt legislation that allows effective screening of packages and visitors, to keep weapons and dangerous drugs out of state prisons.

With significant input from the men and women working in state correctional facilities, I wrote legislation that would address prison violence and drug use head-on. Correctional officers are the boots on the ground. They have the hands-on experience to recommend changes to help stanch the flow of contraband and weapons. My bipartisan legislation passed the Senate 48-14 during the 2018 legislative session. However, despite making multiple Assembly-driven revisions to the bill, the Assembly failed to pass this critical legislation. We need the Governor's help and support to pass this important legislation to make New York's prisons safer for both inmates and officers.

The legislation requires the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision to establish a contraband screening plan in correctional facilities to include:

- Use of leashed and controlled canines at the entrances (at least 12 facilities per week, on a random but rotating basis);
- Search of visitors entering the facility including but not limited to electronic searches, image scanning searches (not backscatter technology), pat searches, and visual searches;
- Training of staff on current contraband screening procedures; and
- Requiring the DOCCS Commissioner to provide the Legislature with an annual report summarizing the current plan and the results of the prior year's plan.

We need to give our corrections officers the tools they need to curtail the influx of dangerous contraband. The measures currently in place are clearly not working and have done little to impact the high level of violence and inmate drug abuse. This is a concern not only for correctional officers and prison staff but also for the families of those who are incarcerated. I met with parents who have a son incarcerated at a state facility who expressed how the availability of drugs in the prison is hindering their son's recovery and rehabilitation. The increase in contraband coming into state correctional facilities is making it harder for officers to control both drug use and violence.

In July 2017, the *Auburn Citizen* published an article highlighting prison contraband entering Auburn Correctional Facility. The report cited data from 2012 to 2015. Auburn Correctional Facility recovered 1,178 illegal contraband items from inmates and visitors at the prison. Of that contraband, there were 708 weapons, 359 drugs, and 111 miscellaneous items such as cash or cell phones. Attempts to bring drugs and weapons into state correctional facilities reached record high levels in 2017.

Data collected indicates that 2017 marked the most violent year inside state prisons since 2007, the year statistics began being recorded. According to statistics provided by DOCCS, assaults on staff statewide have risen from 645 incidents in 2013 to 800 in 2017. As of August 5, 2018, there have already been 556 incidents of assaults on staff. For assaults on inmates, the numbers are even higher. In 2013, there were 767 assaults on inmates statewide, and this number grew to 1,220 in 2017. In the first half of 2018, there have already been 716 assaults on inmates. Every metric tracked by DOCCS (inmate-on-staff assaults, inmate-on-inmate assaults, use of chemical agents, contraband) rose above the previous year's numbers. These alarming statistics and the several incidents since the beginning of this year underscore the critical need for changes to current protocols set forth by DOCCS.

We need to take immediate action to stem the flow of illegal contraband and weapons into our prisons. If the Governor is sincere about reducing violence and drug use in our state correctional facilities, he will take a serious look at my legislation that passed the Senate. As Vice Chair of the Senate's Committee on Crime, Crime Victims, and Corrections, I will continue my aggressive efforts to work with NYSCOPBA and my legislative colleagues to make our correctional facilities safer for all.

Senator Helming represents the 54th Senate District, which consists of Seneca and Wayne Counties, parts of Cayuga and Ontario Counties, and the towns of Lansing and Webster. For more information, please visit Senator Helming's [website](#), or follow @SenatorHelming on Facebook or Twitter.

###