

Jessup's Doors Slam Shut for Good

Gov. O'Malley Calls Facility's Closure 'Step One' In Fixing Maryland's Troubled Prison System

By John Wagner and Rosalind S. Helderman
Washington Post Staff Writers
Tuesday, March 20, 2007; B01

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley strolled confidently alongside a three-story-tall bank of prison cells, each barely large enough to contain the rusting metal bed frame attached to the wall, the uncovered toilet and the tiny sink.

For decades, prisoners packed into these 6-by-9-foot spaces had been responsible for attacks on one another and on the officers guarding them. But yesterday, at O'Malley's order, the House of Correction at Jessup was finally empty.

"We're better than this as a people," O'Malley (D) said as he formally closed the 129-year-old maximum-security prison. "Today's a historic day because our state government . . . is facing up to its own responsibility. . . . For years and years, this facility, which predates Alcatraz, has been functionally obsolete."

The event, which drew a throng of reporters, had a celebratory feel as the new governor and his correctional services secretary, [Gary D. Maynard](#), recounted the five weeks of secrecy that led to the last of the prison's 842 inmates being transferred to other facilities Saturday.

Since his November election, O'Malley has repeatedly said that the state's troubled prison system is among the biggest challenges he faces. Shuttering the House of Correction, widely considered Maryland's most dangerous, was "step one," O'Malley said yesterday, adding that "we have many more steps to take."

Three inmates and [one correctional officer](#) were killed last year at an institution that long ago became known as "the Cut."

Criticism of the administration's swift move was muted yesterday, although some Republicans raised concerns about the level of secrecy involved and inmate advocates said the hasty transfers could cause confusion for families.

"I understand the concerns raised with regard to security, but in general, I don't want to see a pattern of conduct develop where decisions are made and then announced after the fact," said House Minority Leader Anthony J. O'Donnell (R-Calvert).

Mary Ann Saar, correctional services secretary under former governor Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R), praised the bold move by the new administration.

"I think it's about time," Saar said. "They worked very hard at it, and I think they deserve credit for it."

Prison officials explained that the stacked cells were among the antiquated features that

made the House of Correction dangerous.

O'Malley said the metal catwalks that ran along the exterior of the cells were a source of danger because inmates could hear officers coming before the officers could see into their cell.

New facilities in Maryland and elsewhere, Maynard said, are built with far better sightlines for officers.

The construction of one in Cumberland, where 128 cells were recently converted from medium to maximum security, helped facilitate the cloaked transfers.

Inmates were also transferred to several other state facilities, including those in Hagerstown, Baltimore and Westover on the Eastern Shore.

Inmates whose security status is generally reviewed only once a year received an evaluation in the past few weeks, Maynard said. That meant that some who qualified for a reduction in status -- from maximum to medium or minimum security -- were approved for the change months earlier than they might have otherwise. Staff also worked to open new beds in a drug treatment facility for inmates who qualified.

Ninety-seven of the prison's most difficult inmates were temporarily sent out of state, 60 to federal facilities and 37 to prisons in Kentucky and Virginia, officials said.

Maynard said closure of the House of Correction would save the state money because the daily cost of housing inmates at other facilities is less expensive. That, officials said, is in part due to the overtime required to maintain security and the inefficiency of heating a building constructed in 1878.

Sharon Weidenfeld, a private investigator who works with many inmates across the Maryland prison system, said that she has been hearing from anxious clients about the moves.

On Friday, she received a letter from an inmate who had been housed at the Cut for 12 years and was transferred to the Eastern Correctional Institution in Westover.

"I feel like I'm starting my sentence all over again," she said he wrote. "I don't know anyone and no one knows me."

In Virginia, an inmate advocate said she was pleased that Maryland officials had moved to improve prisoner safety but questioned the wisdom of sending the most difficult inmates across state lines, even temporarily.

"So just let ol' Virginia take them?" said Jean Auldridge, executive director of Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants-Virginia. "I was very surprised that Virginia is taking some. Virginia keeps building new prisons saying they need more space."

Prisoners will complain about the disruption to their lives, but they will ultimately be safer in new facilities, said Stephen Meehan, principal counsel of Prisoner Rights Information System of Maryland, which represents inmates who sue over prison conditions.

Meehan said inmates complained of holes in the walls, faulty heat and open sewer lines. Experts say that modern maximum-security prisons must now be built to American Correctional Association standards, typically housing no more than one to two inmates per cell and ensuring that guards have clear sightlines in areas where prisoners might congregate.

"It's really an issue of control. If you don't have control, you have something that can become an explosive atmosphere . . . somebody's going to get hurt," said Cloud H. Miller III, a professor at Kaplan University's Graduate School of Criminal Justice.

Staff writer Raymond McCaffrey and researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company