

In Surprise Move, Md. Closes Jessup Prison, Transfers Inmates

Officials Kept Plans Secret to Prevent Violence

By Rosalind S. Helderman
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, March 19, 2007; A01

Operating with extraordinary secrecy, Maryland corrections officials over the past several weeks transferred all 850 inmates out of the Maryland House of Correction in Jessup, effectively closing the notoriously violent 129-year-old maximum-security prison and ending its decades-long history of riots, fights, escapes and attacks on correctional officers.

Fearful that leaked news of the closure could spark violence in the prison's final days, officials loaded inmates onto buses by the dozens for transfer, some under the cover of night. Prisoners were not told of their destinations until after leaving. Only five of the corrections secretary's 12 top aides were informed of the plan, and some only in the past week.

Even the officers who patrolled the prison were told of the change only on Friday. They were told they all had jobs but that as of today the prison they knew as "the Cut" was shutting down.

"All of us knew that if we told someone who didn't have a need to know and word got out, that would potentially be the person to get someone killed," said Gary D. Maynard, secretary of public safety and correctional services.

Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) will officially announce today that the prison is closed. O'Malley's decision and the inmate transfers were first reported in yesterday's Baltimore Sun.

Corrections officials, union leaders and lawmakers have pushed for the closure of the House of Correction for years because its design is outdated and dangerous. But it took Maynard, who became head of corrections in January, one look to decide that change was needed immediately.

Officials had decided to convert the facility from maximum to minimum security after a correctional officer was killed in July, the first inside a Maryland prison since 1984.

Maynard toured the prison Feb. 6, days after arriving in Maryland from Iowa, where he was the top correctional official. Maynard said he was so disturbed by what he saw that the next day he advised the governor that he would accomplish the conversion to minimum security in 30 days, rather than up to three years, as had been planned.

Then a guard was stabbed March 2. Although the officer survived, Maynard recommended that O'Malley close the facility.

"I had never seen an institution that housed maximum-security inmates that bad," he said. "You could not deal with it in any other way than to deal with it as quickly and decisively as possible."

The red-brick complex's antiquated design was more suited to theories of prison management in place when it first opened in 1878 than to those of the 21st century. Tight corners and narrow staircases made for blind spots that were dangerous for correctional officers to patrol. Screened hallways forced officers to walk long distances within arm's reach of inmates. Thick walls prevented radio communication in some areas. Inmates were able to jimmy outdated locks, allowing some to leave their cells unnoticed.

"Of all the prisons in the Maryland system, the House of Correction is by far the most dangerous," said Sue Esty, legislative director for Council 92 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents corrections officers. "This is huge."

The closure required a complicated dance of prisoner transfers. Some House of Correction inmates were sent to other campuses in Jessup, which houses several prisons. Ninety-seven of the facility's most hardened criminals were transferred out of state: 60 to federal facilities and 37 to prisons in Kentucky and Virginia. In exchange, Maryland agreed to house 60 women from out of state.

Several hundred inmates were sent to the North Branch Correctional Institution in Cumberland, the state's new prison, which opened its first wing in the past several months.

Workers also quickly refurbished 150 cells across the state that had been empty because they needed repairs, filling them with former House of Correction inmates.

A prison reform advocate said yesterday that she worries about the impact of the mass transfers on inmates' families.

"We know it has to be quiet, but the fallout is family members will wake up and read the news and they will say, 'Where is my son, my brother, my uncle?' " said Kimberly Haven, executive director of Justice Maryland. "We have family members who will be very anxious and very concerned about where their loved ones are."

Prison employees will be transferred to other state prisons, mostly in the Jessup area.

"There's going to be adjustment that staff will have to make," said Bernard Ralph Jr., a prison lieutenant and president of AFSCME Local 1678, representing Jessup officers. "We've been assured these adjustments will be done in a fair and equitable manner."

But union leaders said the shifts are a small price to pay for the closure of the dangerous prison. Esty said other Jessup area prisons have had trouble recruiting officers, and officers from the shuttered facility will help fill vacant positions elsewhere. "That's a huge secondary benefit," she said.

A Republican state senator said yesterday that he agreed with O'Malley's assessment that the prison required drastic action, but he warned that the solution the governor devised could only work for the short term.

"You can't be continually shipping people out of state and renting rooms in other prisons," said Minority Leader David R. Brinkley (R-Frederick).

Originally nicknamed "the Cut" because of a railroad cut into the countryside nearby, the Maryland House of Correction came to earn the name because of a reputation for violence like no other prison in the state.

Massive riots hit the prison in 1945 and again in 1964. In 1979, 30 inmates fled after they used a saw to cut through a window. In 1988, three inmates escaped from the prison and ran from authorities for 13 days, fatally shooting a police officer in Tallahassee.

"Have you ever seen 'The Shawshank Redemption'?" asked Ralph, referring to the 1994 prison movie. "That's what it reminded me of. The darkness, the grays, the no color. . . . It's what a person would dream a prison would look like."

At a legislative hearing in August, Maryland's top prison officials described a corrections system with too few experienced officers and inadequate training. They told lawmakers that inmates with smuggled cellphones coordinated riots, planned assaults on correctional officers and orchestrated drug trades beyond prison walls.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find a prison that recently has been so plagued with violence across the entire country," said George Camp of the Criminal Justice Institute, a national prison consulting firm based in Middletown, Conn.

Prison officials have not decided what will become of the buildings and land, although they said it is important to preserve the site's history.

Staff writers John Wagner and Eric Rich and staff researcher Rena Kirsch contributed to this report.