

*From the Baltimore Sun*

# The price of violence

## **Hospital care for inmates assaulted in Maryland prisons is expected to cost more than \$1 million this year**

By Greg Garland and Annie Linskey  
Sun reporters

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Maryland is on track to spend upward of \$1 million to treat inmates who have been injured in prison violence this year, a tab that doesn't include the cost borne by local governments of transporting inmates to hospitals and of prosecuting assailants, records show.

In the first six months of this year, 257 assaults took place in state-run prisons and jails in which injuries suffered by prisoners were severe enough to warrant trips to the hospital, according to a report by a state contractor that monitors medical treatment costs. Hospital and emergency room costs to treat the inmates came to about \$860,000, the report says.

Other expenses: Correctional officers attacked on the job can draw as much as two-thirds of their pay for up to a year as "accident leave" if administrators approve. Some counties foot the bills for taking inmates by ambulance to area hospitals. And county prosecutors spend tens of thousands of dollars making cases against prisoners for the violent crimes they commit behind bars.

The total costs are hard to measure, but this year has been especially bloody. Two correctional officers and three inmates have been killed; dozens have been seriously injured. The state's corrections chief lost his job as a result, and the problems have led to greater legislative scrutiny of the way the prison system is managed.

"I think it's more serious than anyone realizes," said Sen. James E. DeGrange Sr., an Anne Arundel County Democrat who has set a legislative hearing for 10 a.m. today on prison violence.

Anne Arundel County State's Attorney Frank R. Weathersbee said his office could keep a full-time prosecutor busy handling nothing but cases from the complex of state prisons in Jessup.

"There is a lot of money tied up in these prosecutions," Weathersbee said.

He recalled the office working on a prison murder case that dragged on for two years

and cost the county \$250,000.

Weathersbee said "violence is running rampant" inside the Jessup prisons.

Kimberly Haven, director of Justice Maryland, a group that advocates for prisoners and their families, said the state is paying the price for failing to fund the kind of rehabilitation programs known to reduce prison violence.

"We're not using our resources wisely, and we end up paying more in the long run," she said. "I can only imagine what programs we could put together with that million dollars, instead of prosecuting people and patching them up."

Conditions in Maryland's prisons are so bad, Haven said, that inmates have told her they strap magazines to their chests, under their shirts, before going to the dining hall - makeshift body armor to protect themselves from knife attacks.

Such precautions seem prudent.

Searches at the Maryland House of Correction in Jessup after the July 25 killing of Correctional Officer David McGuinn turned up dozens of "shanks" - homemade knives - as well as numerous cell phones, pornographic DVDs, sacks of tobacco and other contraband.

The Sun obtained photos from a source that show a large conference table laden with weapons and other prohibited items recovered during searches of the prison after McGuinn's killing.

Prison officials confirmed the photos are authentic.

"What this shows is the level of problems that existed at the Maryland House of Correction," said Priscilla Doggett, a spokeswoman for the state prisons. "Our new acting commissioner is adamant that he is going to attack this problem and clean up the environment where this kind of contraband can enter our facilities."

The acting commissioner is John A. Rawley, who previously ran a medium-security prison in Jessup. He replaced Commissioner Frank C. Sizer Jr., who abruptly stepped down last month. State officials recently announced they will spend an additional \$7 million this year to improve security in the state's prisons.

The House of Correction has been on lockdown since Mc-Guinn's death two months ago, which means inmates are largely confined to their cells or dormitories and most privileges are revoked.

DeGrange said he has heard from inmates and their relatives that they feel they have to arm themselves and join gangs for self-protection inside the prisons.

"They realize these correctional officers can't protect themselves so they figure they sure as hell can't protect us," DeGrange said.

While inmates fashion shanks from pieces of metal, plastic or other items, contraband such as cell phones and tobacco is usually smuggled in by visitors or corrupt staff, according to current and former prison officials.

According to the prison assaults report done for the state by Wexford Health Services Inc., the Jessup complex accounted for nearly one-fourth of the 257 claims paid for inmate assaults from January to June, at a cost of about \$265,000. There were 41 claims paid in the eastern region, 33 in the Hagerstown region, 32 in the Baltimore region and four in the western region. An additional 88 claims were paid for assaults at two state-run jails, the report said.

The number of serious assaults in Maryland's prisons eclipses those reported by two neighboring states, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

A spokesman for Pennsylvania's corrections department said there were 15 physical assaults involving a weapon or requiring outside medical treatment between January and June in that state's prison system - the period during which Maryland logged 257 inmate assaults that were serious enough to require hospital treatment.

Officials in Virginia reported only 19 major assaults for all of last year in its state prison system.

Mark Vernarelli, a spokesman for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, suggested that Maryland does a better job of reporting inmate assaults than many other states.

"We are making a concerted effort to carefully track all assaults," Vernarelli said.

He also said a recent study of conditions inside U.S. prisons "made it clear that some states are not collecting or reporting their assault data accurately or carefully."

A certain level of violence in prisons is almost unavoidable, according to Vernarelli.

"When you put 1,200 men under the same roof, and some of those men had extremely violent tendencies in society, it's unrealistic to think there won't be any violence in prison," he said.

But others say violence is clearly out of hand in Maryland. Correctional officers' unions and some elected officials have blamed the state for operating facilities that are understaffed and unsafe.

"Maryland is going through a traumatic time," said Ron Angelone, a former head of Virginia's corrections department who now does consulting work.

He said no level of violence inside a state's prison system should be considered acceptable.

"There's always going to be violent inmates, and gangs do present a problem to correctional administrators, and that's just a problem correctional administrators have to deal with," he said.

Haven, the advocate, said prisons have become a powder keg because there are not enough productive activities to engage inmates - either work or educational programs.

"Idleness is a huge part of it," Haven said. "We don't have enough programs, and the

waiting list for the programs they do have is unbelievable. People want something to do. We all need something to do."

In a letter to DeGrange, she wrote that legislators need to move beyond finger-pointing and address the underlying problem that is fueling violence in the state's prisons.

Inmates want a safe environment inside the prisons and the state has an obligation to create one for them, Haven said.

"What do I say to someone who tells me he and others like him walk to the dining hall with magazines strapped to their chest so they feel safer getting a meal?" she wrote DeGrange.

Meantime, the violence imposes financial burdens on all jurisdictions where state-run prisons and jails are located. Legislators received complaints about that from officials of Anne Arundel and Washington counties during a legislative hearing last month on prison safety.

In Anne Arundel County, Fire Department officials met recently with state prison administrators to discuss ways to reduce some of the growing burden that the Jessup prison complex is imposing on the county.

One example: Five of the county's 21 ambulances and one fire engine sped to Jessup late Friday to treat prisoners injured in a particularly vicious fight. Authorities were forced to use pepper spray to break up the fracas. Four inmates with stab wounds had to be transported to two hospitals for treatment. All had been returned to their prison cells as of Tuesday.

County officials estimate the cost of a typical emergency ambulance call at \$350, an expense the county has to absorb.

Local prosecutors, too, are feeling pinched as they prosecute murder and assault cases from state prisons in their jurisdictions.

Said Charles P. Strong Jr., the state's attorney of Washington County: "It clearly ties up staff and costs the taxpayers of Washington County money."

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**greg.garland@baltsun.com annie.linskey@baltsun.com**

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