

Sun exclusive

Violent prison shuts down

Public safety head moved to close Jessup's 128-year-old facility after March stabbing

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sun reporters

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State officials have abruptly shut down the Maryland House of Correction, an antiquated and notorious maximum-security prison in Jessup where inmate violence had spiraled out of control and corruption had run rampant.

Prison administrators had planned to convert the 128-year-old prison - where a correctional officer and three inmates have been killed within the past year - to a minimum-security facility in coming months. But the state's top correctional official said yesterday that he began laying plans to close the prison within hours of the non-fatal March 2 stabbing of a correctional officer there.

"The House of Correction was one of the worst in terms of officer safety and efficiency of operation," said Gary D. Maynard, who took over in January as Maryland's secretary of public safety and correctional services. "You can't put enough officers here to make it safe."

The last few dozen of the 842 inmates who were there when Maynard put his plan in motion were scheduled to move out of the prison yesterday. Inside the prison's south wing, prisoners shuffled through the hallways yesterday afternoon carrying trash bags stuffed with their belongings, and guards wearing plastic gloves dragged mattresses down a stairway. They walked by empty jail cells.

Inmates were transferred in groups of 15 to 40 in vans and buses during daytime hours, said John A. Rowley, acting commissioner of the Division of Correction. Each operation was carried out in secrecy in the past two weeks to ensure security.

Most of the prisoners were sent to other facilities in Maryland, many to the North Branch Correctional Institution in Cumberland. Officials said that 97 of the "most disruptive" inmates were moved to federal prisons across the country or to state facilities in Kentucky and Virginia.

The House of Correction's 438 employees will be transferred to other facilities in the region.

Union leaders have long complained about conditions at the antiquated prison, which

opened in 1879. It was long known as a place where drugs, tobacco and other contraband flowed freely, earning the nickname "House of Corruption" among some veteran officers.

"It's been a dangerous prison for a long time for both inmates and staff," said Sue Esty, interim executive director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 92.

A series of incidents at the prison made headlines in the past year.

Last summer, three prisoners were killed in inmate-on-inmate violence at the prison. In July, Officer David McGuinn, known as a "by the book" officer who strictly enforced the rules, was stabbed to death - allegedly by two inmates wielding homemade knives. Prison officials said the inmates had jammed open their cell doors, which had locks long known to be faulty.

Earlier this month, correctional officer Edouardo F. Edouazin, 28, was returning an inmate to his cell - unaccompanied by another officer - when a prisoner serving a life sentence for murder attacked him with a homemade knife, officials said. In addition, there have been dozens of stabbings and other inmate-on-inmate attacks over the years.

Maynard said that after that incident, he presented a plan to Gov. Martin O'Malley to close the prison.

Under his plan, about 60 prisoners were sent to federal prisons out of the state. In exchange, the state will accept an equal number of nonviolent female prisoners from federal facilities, a spokesman for O'Malley said.

Another 37 prisoners were sent to either Virginia or Kentucky under a program called Interstate Compact. Instead of receiving inmates from those states, Maryland will pay a monthly per diem for housing inmates from the House of Correction.

Maynard said that the expense of moving the inmates and reimbursing those states would be covered by the savings on overtime expenses for officers at the House of Correction and that the department would be able to cover the expenses in its current budget.

The public safety secretary said the move of House of Correction inmates to other state prisons would not overburden those facilities because the department had sufficient space at the other prisons to accommodate the influx.

O'Malley said yesterday that he had been considering closing the prison when Maynard presented the idea to him at a State Stat meeting two weeks ago. "As long as I can remember, people have been saying we should close the House of Correction," O'Malley said. "I'm very proud it's our first order of business really in cleaning up our prisons."

Kimberly Haven, executive director of Justice Maryland, which advocates for prisoner rights, said she knew the facility would eventually be closed and she understood the reasoning behind it. But she questioned the wisdom of potentially moving inmates farther away from their families.

"We know the role that families can play in how someone does their time," Haven said.

"To move them out of state just fractures an already fragile bond."

Transferring the state's most hardened convicts to faraway prisons was a major undertaking, officials said. Inmates were told the morning of their move that they were being shipped out, and they weren't told where.

"The inmates would have no idea where they were going," Rowley said.

Two specially trained, six-member "response" teams were assigned to each transport, sorting inmates' belongings and closely monitoring prisoners on the buses. Four "chase" vehicles followed each bus.

"The special response teams practiced taking down a bus," referring to the act of stopping prisoners who become rowdy, Rowley said. "They were very well-trained going into this."

Even the wardens at their destination prisons did not know the House of Correction was closing, Rowley said.

State officials have not decided the fate of the four-story brick building on a sprawling parcel off of Route 175. Two facilities adjacent to the House of Correction - the maximum-security Jessup Correctional Institution, formerly known as the Annex, and the medium-security Maryland Correctional Institution-Jessup - will remain open.

Gary Hornbaker, the House of Correction's warden, said the design of the prison made it difficult to control inmates. Walking through the facility's south wing yesterday afternoon, he pointed to a narrow hallway, no more than 3 1/2 feet wide, lined by cells. He pointed out that old-fashioned cell bars made it easy for prisoners to stab officers as they walked by.

He also pointed to the ceiling, known to shed paint chips and leak water. "There were times when, if you had to get to my office, you had to use an umbrella," he said.

In the south wing yesterday, the only sounds were inmates chatting as they walked through the hallways, followed closely by correctional officers. One side of the room contained four floors of 9-foot-by-6-foot cells, all empty, with the doors open.

Many of the empty cells had decorations - newspaper clippings featuring pictures of Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis Colts taped to a wall; a Washington Redskins emblem painted next to a porcelain sink; a Playboy bunny stenciled on a floor. Metal racks that once held mattresses were suspended from chains attached to the wall.

William W. Sondervan, who ran Maryland's prisons from 1999 to 2003, agreed that the House of Correction's configuration made it particularly hard to control.

"The architectural design was from 1878," Sondervan said. "It was big and it was sprawled out. We had maximum-security inmates in dormitories and more than we should have had there."

He described the House as "essentially one big building, with lots of little places for inmates to hide contraband" and conceal other activities from prison officials.

"Everybody has to walk through pretty much the whole building to eat or go to shops to work. The design made it not conducive to good security," he said.

Sondervan said he and three other former Maryland prison commissioners and a former director of parole and probation held a five-hour meeting with Maynard on March 10 to discuss problems with the system.

"Our concern was for the safety and well-being of the employees of the department," Sondervan said.

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