

Viewpoints

Abusive conditions reported from prisons

In June, the Commission on Safety and Abuse In America's Prisons released its report "*Confronting Confinement*." The report describes widespread deplorable conditions at far too many of America's penal institutions, about how we can overcome these serious shortcomings, and the risks for all of us if we fail to act.

The Commission's 126-page report, and all the testimony given at four public hearings, can be accessed at www.prisoncommission.org

To learn more about New York's prisons, read the testimonies of Sister Antonia Maguire, a Catholic nun who has worked with inmates at three New York prisons (pay particular attention to her account of one death of a four-month year old infant who had lived in a prison nursery, after his mother was repeatedly told by a prison nurse and a doctor there was nothing wrong with him); Asha Bandelle, author of the *Prisoner's Wife*; Eddie Ellis, a former inmate; Elaine Lord, former superintendent of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility; and Jack Beck, director of the Correctional Association of New York's (C.A.) Prison Visiting Project.

In addition to formal testimony, the Commission received more than 1000 letters, e-mails and phone calls from current and former prisoners and their family members, and from correction officers and corrections administrators.

The Commission reported that these communications, including some from New York, described "abusive conditions in segregation with, physical and sexual violence, gangs, the treatment of Muslim-Americans after September 11, 2001, and humiliation. Many people described gross medical neglect. Prisoners described ugly reprisals for speaking the truth, and officers told us about losing their jobs after reporting abuses by fellow officers. Inadequate treatment for the mentally ill, racial discrimination, and crowding were among the other concerns raised."

The Correctional Association of New York has legislative authority to monitor New York's prisons and has often found the kinds of abuses described above. However, Jack Beck told the Commission that "The NY State Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) has refused to comment on our reports, which we send to DOCS prior to their publication, to enter into any discussions with us about our findings and recommendations after the reports are issued, or to share with us what actions, if any, it intends to take to address these issues."

In its report, the Commission observed: "We can legitimately deprive prisoners of liberty, but we can not allow anyone who is incarcerated to be victimized by other prisoners, abused by officers or neglected by doctors."

In past letters to the Courier-Gazette, I have expressed my opinion that local Senator Michael Nozzolio, who chairs the State Senate Committee that has oversight over New York's prisons, has been lax in his responsibilities to help protect prisoners from harm.

Nozzolio should read the Commission's report and help to implement its recommendations in our state's prisons. This time, Nozzolio can not dismiss "*Confronting Confinement*" as the work of misguided liberals. Commission members include conservative Republican legislators, a former US Attorney General, a former FBI director, a county Sheriff, a State corrections department director, a former major General in the US Army, a former US Court of Appeals Chief Judge, and a past president of the American Jail Association.

Joel Freedman, Canandaigua

(Freedman writes about the criminal justice system for "Justicia" newsletter of the Rochester headquartered Judicial Process Commission)