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STUDY SAYS PRISON TREATMENT PROGRAM INEFFICIENT

A program that treats prisoners convicted of violent offenses is inefficient and could be overhauled to save millions for the state, according to a report released Wednesday by a two citizen's groups. Legislation to regulate the program will be introduced soon, but a Department of Corrections spokesperson said officials are already working to correct the problems and a law would be unnecessary.

The Assaultive Offender Program is a year-long rehabilitation curriculum offered to prisoners with offenses ranging from stalking to homicide. It involves group therapy to help prisoners recognize and change their behavior.

The Citizen's Alliance on Prison's and Public Spending and American Friends Service Committee said the program works for prisoners, and results in higher rates of parole for those who go through it. But the report prepared by the two groups said inefficiencies and long waiting lists for the program leave many prisoners incarcerated who could be released.

Barbara Levine, the executive director of CAPPs, said there are more than 2,000 prisoners on waiting lists to get in to the rehabilitation program, and the number of people in line grew by 19 percent last year. She said the problem is compounded by a lack of organization.

"Without a single statewide list, people keep on moving up and down the single facility lists as they move around the state and change institutions," Ms. Levine said.

Many of the prisoners who are not able to complete the rehabilitation program in time for a parole hearing are denied parole for that very reason, Ms. Levine said. And she said last year more than half of the prisoners who had finished the program were denied parole.

"Many people who do complete the program are denied parole because the parole board assesses prisoners differently than the psychologists," Ms. Levine said.

The other problems outlined in the report include a disparity in psychologists for the program and prisons in the Michigan system that do not offer the rehabilitation program.

Ms. Levine said the people being left in prison because of problems with the assaultive prisoner program are costing the state about \$12 million a year to support. She said releasing about 600 of those prisoners would save about \$7 million. She and her colleagues said 600 was a conservative estimate for the amount of prisoners that could be released if the program were run more efficiently.

Sen. Michael Bishop (R-Rochester) said Wednesday he will be introducing legislation that complies with most of the report's recommendations.

He said in any given day he gets "five or six reports saying the same thing" Wednesday's report said. "The waiting list continues to grow," Mr. Bishop said. "We've been in denial in the system in terms of how to address it."

His legislation will include the following stipulations for the assaultive prisoner program:

- The parole board will be prohibited from denying release to a prisoner solely for failing to complete the Assaultive Offender Program.
- The state will be required to maintain a statewide roster of prisoners waiting for the program and transfer prisoners to facilities where the program is available.
- An administrative review process will be implemented when the parole board's decision is inconsistent with a therapy termination report.
- The parole board would be allowed to delay a decision to allow a prisoner to complete the rehabilitation program.

Russ Marlan, a spokesperson for the Department of Corrections, said officials had known about and acknowledged some problems with the assaultive prisoner therapy program for a while. But he said the department is already taking their own corrective action.

Mr. Marlan did say the CAPPS report mischaracterized the therapy program as a "cure all" program. He said it was not that simple, but he said "We do agree that prisoners need to be in the program and completing it."

The Department of Corrections does not have a timeline for when it might implement some fixes for the program, Mr. Marlan said. He said some changes might involve moving psychologists around to better maximize the time they use, the possibility of a future facility devoted to the Assaultive Offender Program and reviewing the discrepancies in how the program's assessment and the parole board's assessment differ.