

Looking to Make Changes Behind Bars

New Chief at Jail Says System Needs Correcting

By SERGE F. KOVALESKI
Washington Post Staff Writer

The new director of the D.C. Department of Corrections says he wants to transform the agency into a "model local correctional system."

But to do that, says Devon Brown, he needs more space, more resources and new rehabilitation programs for the District jail.

In his first interview since taking over the department last month, Brown said much of his attention will be on initiatives aimed at helping inmates with education, drug addiction and mental health issues.

"I have always been focused on rehabilitation and breaking the cycle of incarceration," he said. "But the jail does not have the physical structure that would allow for the implementation of all these programs. One of the options is to add on to the existing jail."

The D.C. jail's capacity is also an issue for prisoner advocates, but for a different reason.

They say Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) and the Corrections Department have never complied with a two-year-old city law that is intended to ease crowding at the jail by establishing an inmate population cap based on a number provided by an outside consultant. An advocacy group filed a lawsuit last June to force Williams to set the cap. The consultant had recommended a range between 1,958 and 2,164, but lately the jail's

population has been hovering around 2,400.

"We are sorry to be greeting Mr. Brown with an issue that should have been resolved two years ago. But our top priority is reducing the illegal overcrowding at the D.C. jail," said Philip Fornaci, executive director of the D.C. Prisoners' Legal Services Project.

He said that watchdog groups have been receiving more reports about violence and overburdened medical care at the detention facility.

Added lawyer and advocate Douglas R. Sparks: "How can you expect people in jail to have any respect for the law when their jailers are violating the law every day with impunity? They have people in there like sardines. It is inhumane."

Brown, 56, who assumed the director's

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Devon Brown says he needs more space and resources to improve D.C. jail inmates' chances for rehabilitation.

job Jan. 10, said he does not believe that anyone is being treated inhumanely at the jail. He added that the jail's population on any given day is not a "correctional issue alone."

The facility's head count, Brown said, is determined by the number of arrests, by how many detainees the courts send to the detention center and by the federal government, which places inmates at the jail before they are sent to Federal Bureau of Prisons locations. About half of the inmates at the jail are pretrial defendants.

"We do not dictate who comes in our gates. We are the passive recipients of our clientele," Brown said.

The deputy mayor for public safety and justice, Edward D. Reiskin, said that the cap is "a requirement that can't be unilaterally fulfilled." He said, for instance, that the District is working with the Court Services and Offender Su-

pervision Agency and the U.S. Parole Commission so that parole violators are moved out of the jail more quickly.

He said, however, that the city probably will have to acquire more space, either at the adjacent Central Treatment Facility, which is privately run, or through halfway houses. He said there are no plans to build a new jail. The District has invested about \$40 million in improvements in the existing one over the past six years, Reiskin said.

Inmate advocates said it is incumbent on the Department of Corrections to find alternatives to house inmates when the District jail is filled beyond its capacity.

Brown comes back to the District after serving as New Jersey's

corrections commissioner since April 2002. In 1998, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno named Brown a deputy trustee to help shut down the Lorton Correctional Complex and improve the District's corrections agency. The corrections trustee detailed Brown to serve as interim director of the department for five months.

Brown said he has concerns about the "very aging correctional force" at the District jail. "We have only one correctional officer who is under 30 and one who just celebrated her 70th birthday," he said. Brown asserted that a younger, well-trained force could provide better security in an environment of "inmate hyper-masculinity and virility."

He also warned that the jail's important records office needs more staffing immediately to prevent early or late releases and other mistakes.

Noting that about one-third of the jail's inmates require mental

health services, Fornaci said he would like to see Brown have the corrections agency work more closely with the District's Department of Mental Health. Fornaci also wants better mechanisms for resolving inmate complaints.

Fornaci said the Department of Corrections "has had the mentality of being a fortress and not taking input from the outside, and in fact has had a confrontational relationship with advocates for many years."

But Sparks said Brown "is one of the rare kind of corrections professionals who is not threatened by listening to the views of other people and giving them fair consideration."

"The biggest thing this guy brings here is hope," Sparks said.