

Planning For The Future Of Prisons

THE RESEARCH FOR THIS REPORT included tours of three correctional facilities: the Suffolk County House of Corrections, in Boston; the Hampden County House of Correction, in Ludlow; and the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center, in Shirley. Each is symbolic, in its own way, of the recent past, the present and, perhaps, the future of criminal justice in Massachusetts.

The two county facilities were among the first built in the wave of prison expansion and modernization that Souza-Baranowski brings nearly to a close. A decade ago, both counties were under court orders limiting the populations of antiquated and overpopulated facilities for both pretrial detainees and sentenced county offenders.

Hampden County Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr. - then and now one of the most humane and innovative jailers in the Commonwealth, if not the country - earned an ill-fitting blood-and-guts reputation nationally when he commandeered the Springfield Armory in 1990 in order to prevent the forced release of prisoners. In 1992, Ashe moved out of the dungeon-like York Street Jail and into the Hampden County Correctional Center, a sprawling complex of buildings on a corner of what was formerly Westover Air Field. That same year, Suffolk County's Deer Island House of Correction was mothballed, replaced by the new facility in Boston's South Bay, with its 11-story tower.

The new facilities were supposed to provide the "solution" to overcrowding. After all, the relics they replaced, which had half their capacity, were adequate for more than a century before they were outgrown and worn out. But with the gleam of newness barely dulled in these new buildings - prisons are built to last - each is already filled beyond the occupancy it was designed for.

At the Hampden County House of Correction, the overcrowding - 39 percent above capacity - does not yet constitute a crisis. With acreage not an issue, cells were built oversized, to allow double and triple-bunking. And Sheriff Ashe has developed the state's most extensive system of community corrections - pre-release, day reporting, electronic monitoring, etc. - to reduce the population behind the walls and to better prepare offenders for parole or discharge. But the sheriff has had to cut back on the number of Department of Correction inmates he helps prepare for a return to their Hampden County homes. Given a spacious new facility by the state, Ashe was taking more than 150 state inmates from western Massachusetts at a time, relieving state-prison overcrowding and managing the supervised re-integration of these offenders into society - an approach Ashe believes reduces future criminality. But as even this vast new space has gotten tight, Ashe can find room for only half that number of state inmates. As a result, more state-prison inmates from western Massachusetts are going home without the controlled transition Sheriff Ashe can give them.