

COMMENTARY/LETTERS

PERSONAL VIEWS

Maybe We Should Bar Failed Prison Policies

The editorial of March 29 ["Open and Shut Case: Prison Space Needed"] indicates that the editorial board did not understand the Governor's Task Force on Crime and Corrections' report, nor Gov. Edgar's charge to the task force regarding more prison space.

The governor's task force, representing a broad base of law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, corrections officials, civic and legal organizations, developed a comprehensive plan that included some additional prison capacity but recognized that the state's prison building boom of the last 15 years (15 prisons at a capital cost of \$560 million) has neither solved the prison crowding crisis nor reduced the crime rate.

We do not need more maximum security prison beds. What is needed is to renovate some of these antiquated, turn-of-the-century facilities to make them smaller and more able to manage difficult offenders.

Simplistic responses, such as noted in columnist Raymond R. Coffey's column March 26 ["Whole Truth on Sentencing: It's a Joke"], help fuel the myths that the Sun-Times editorial board perpetuates—just more prison space—and avoids responsible action toward prison overcrowding.

As the governor's task force's comprehensive recommendations are incorporated into public policy, the Sun-Times could provide a public service to its readers by communicating the positive impact of these recommendations, as opposed to continued advocacy for the decades-old failed policy of just more prison space.

Michael J. Mahoney,
executive director,
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for Prison Reform

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When will we wake up and smell the coffee? Or is it garbage that I smell? As reported in your paper [news stories, March 11], the Illinois Task Force on Crime and Corrections is requesting that \$60 million be spent to build a super-maximum security prison. Your editorial on March 29 supports this proposal.

'Super-max' prisons already exist. Marion Federal Penitentiary in Downstate Illinois is the granddaddy of them all. A number of other states have them as well. Westville in Indiana and Pelican Bay in California are examples. These prisons have been condemned by many national and international human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Permanent isolation 23 hours a day, year after year. No human contact; even visits with loved ones and families are through Plexiglass walls and over telephones. Finger probes of the rectum. Chained spread-eagle to concrete slab beds. No real education or recreation. And make no mistake about it, these super-max prisons contain African Americans in even more disproportionate numbers than the prison system overall.

The State of Illinois can't afford to help pay the education of Chicago's youth, but is considering throwing the \$60 million into a torture chamber that has not proved effective in making our streets any safer. In fact, many prisoners have testified that these hellholes only engender more rage, anger and bitterness. What will these people be like when they are released back into society?

Shouldn't there be a massive public debate on the merits of such a product, both because of the enormous costs as well as the moral and political implications?

Nancy Kurshan, Lake View

