

Supermaximum prison peril warned

By Erik Christianson
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SPRINGFIELD—Despite widespread support for a supermaximum-security penitentiary in Illinois, a small human rights group is warning that the facility would be too expensive and would actually cause more prison violence.

Furthermore, said Kent Steiner of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, a new super-tight prison would breed racism and violate inmates' human rights. Steiner's group was formed after the federal supermaximum-security prison in Marion was put on permanent lockdown in 1985.

"[Supermax] is an impossible solution," Steiner said. "It only increases the rage and resentment of prisoners. It does nothing to rehabilitate them."

Prison officials, however, are pushing the legislature to release \$60 million to start the facility, which was one recommendation of Gov. Jim Edgar's task force on prison crowding.

The General Assembly and the Illinois Department of Corrections also support the idea.

Edgar, though, wants to study cheaper alternatives before pouring \$60 million into a 500-bed penitentiary.

Supporters say the supermax prison would reduce jail violence by isolating the most dangerous prisoners. Such a prison would also cut down on costly "lock-downs," in which all inmates are restricted to their cells following violent outbursts.

More than 100 prison officers, most in uniform, rallied at the Capitol Tuesday in support of the prison and other task force recommendations to reduce overcrowding in the state penitentiaries, which cram 32,000 inmates into space designed for 21,000.

They said the fact that there have been more than 1,000 assaults on staff members by inmates each year since 1990 proves the state needs the prison.

"The supermax will give us a deterrent, give us a place to send these guys," said James Atkins, a prison officer at the Stateville maximum-security prison in

Joliet.

"I've spent 18 years of my life in this environment. Everybody has rights but [prisoners have] got to comply with the rules and regulations of the facility. You don't have a right to kill and starve corrections officers."

Steiner said more than 36 states have supermaximum-security facilities. At least one has been the subject of more than just criticism.

California's Security Housing Unit at Pelican Bay, which houses more than 1,000 inmates, has been named in a lawsuit saying the prison might violate the 8th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment.

While the debate continues, Atkins warned that something needs to be done immediately to relieve the pressure on Illinois' corrections system.

"If we can't get the worst of the worst out of there and away from those who want to come and do their time and pay their debt to society," he said, "it's a powder keg."