

Officials Differ on Money As Cause of Attica Revolt

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ALBANY, Sept. 25 — Correction Commissioner Russell G. Oswald maintains that the prison system is "fiscally starved," but at least one of his associates is convinced that budgetary restraints were not a 'major factor in the Attica uprising."

"You cannot put it all on that," Deputy Correction Commissioner Wim van Eekeren said in an interview. "Money could have been a factor, but there were a great many other elements too. It is impossible to say what could have prevented Attica."

Commissioner van Eekeren conceded, however, that budget problems had forced the department to "go slow" on several improvements at the prison and in the system generally on items that were high on the inmates' complaint list.

Food Liked as Example

One of those items is food. In the past, he said, prisoners' diets have been determined pretty much on a straight cost basis, without allowance for the fact that they "might have been a little deficient" on such elements as "fresh vegetables and citrus."

The Department of Correctional Services, Mr. van Eekeren continued, had been trying to shift to a more "nutritional" diet, but the effort "was showed" by a tight budget.

The iron grip of economics has traditionally determined the composition of prison diets. Much of the food at Attica, for instance, comes from the prison's 370-acre farm, worked by about 40 inmates.

Pork — a major complaint of Moslem prisoners — appeared frequently in the mess hall because pigs are comparatively cheap and easy to raise. In the last fiscal year, the farm produced 1,559 pounds of chicken and about 15,500 pounds of beef but almost 50,000 pounds of pork.

Diet was not the only thing affected by what Commissioner Oswald, in a tape-recorded talk to the Attica prisoners six days before the Sept. 9 uprising, described as "the difficulties of our current budget crisis."

Vocational Training

The correction department had been hoping to expand its vocational training program into the evening hours so that prisoners, who spend about 50 per cent of their time in their cells, would be free to improve their work skills after the 5 P.M. lockup.

The quality of department's vocational-training programs has been sharply criticized, among others, by Jerry Wurf, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, A.F.L.-C.I.O.

Mr. Wurf, threatening a "lock-in" of prisoners by corrections officers if the state did not move to improve conditions for both guards and inmates, contended recently that much of the equipment used in the vocational classes "is so old that it hasn't been used in industry in 50 years."

Commissioner van Eekeren, who is head of the department's administrative services, maintained that budget problems had hampered the making of improvements in the vocational program at Attica and the expansion of a released-time program in which selected

prisoners are permitted to work in private industry outside the walls.

Improved vocational-training and released-time programs are part of the raw material from which Commissioner Oswald hopes to forge a shift in emphasis from custody to rehabilitation.

In a recent interview with Walter Cronkite on a Columbia Broadcasting System program, Commissioner Oswald alluded to the money problem when he said: "One can't rehabilitate people by keeping them in cells. And one can't keep them out of cells without adequate financing. I have been saying from the time I've come here, [in January this year] that the program has been fiscally starved."

Is the correction department fiscally starved? From the fiscal year 1967 to this fiscal year, according to department figures, the budget has increased from \$62-million to about \$81-million. The number of state prisoners decreased slightly in that period, but the transfer of city prisoners to state custody makes exact comparisons impossible.

In 1967, the department's appropriation amounted to about 4.8 per cent of spending for all state purposes. By this fiscal year, the figure dropped to just under 3 per cent.

Thus, while the department has received more money, it has been allotted a steadily declining proportion of the state's resources.

Much of this year's increase, on the other hand—about \$5-million—has gone into administrative overhead, including the creation of a number of new top-level and middle-management jobs, and the \$200,000 cost of new offices.

Mr. van Eekeren attributes the department's money problem to the fact that "prisons are not visible."

"There is no political gain," he said, "in putting money into prisons when there are so many other more visible priorities."