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Union: Hire 214 extra prison guards State can afford it, labor leaders say, and attacks warrant it.

By Bob Laylo
Of The Morning Call

The union that represents state prison guards says it wants 214 more guards hired to improve security, and doing that would not add significantly to the state Corrections Department's \$1 billion annual budget.

Officials with the State Corrections Officers Association said the hires won't eliminate attacks such as the one Friday at Mahanoy State Prison, but would minimize them, particularly at a time when the institutions are crowded.

"You can't always control an inmate," said Roy Pinto, the union's eastern region vice president. "And corrections officers are always outnumbered."

The Corrections Department Web site says most of the prisons are over "operational bed capacity."

Graterford, at 121.5 percent, is the worst, followed by Camp Hill at 119.5 percent and Frackville and Houtzdale, Clearfield County, at 118.7 percent.

But the union says the prisons are worse than the state says. For example, Pinto said Frackville added a dorm-style setup in a maintenance area, increasing the number of inmates and its capacity.

"They are really good at changing calculations when it doesn't agree with them," Pinto said.

The union prefers to use capacity levels — what institutions were built to handle.

It says the prison at Greensburg, Westmoreland County, is the worst, with the facility at 192.9 percent of capacity. It says Rockview, Centre County, is at 158.3 percent of capacity and Frackville at 151 percent.

Mahanoy is at 105 percent of capacity, according to the union.

Those numbers are worse than they were when a four-day riot rocked Camp Hill State Prison, leaving 138 guards injured and 17 held hostage. There also were riots that year in Huntingdon, Huntingdon County; Graterford and Rockview.

State Sen. James Rhoades, R-Schuylkill, and state Rep. David Argall, R-Schuylkill, plan to introduce legislation this year that would force the state to hire additional guards.

The attack, which hospitalized Mahanoy guard Joseph Duffy, also has the union calling for the resignation or firing of Mahanoy Superintendent Edward Klem because he refused to lock down the prison after the assault.

"If you keep it locked down for two or three days, that sends a message we are not going to tolerate this stuff," union President Donald G. McNany said. "Then inmates police their own."

State Corrections Secretary Jeffrey A. Beard is expected to respond to the union's criticisms this

week, but did not issue a statement Wednesday. Calls to the department press office were not returned Wednesday.

The dispute was set off by the attack at Mahanoy.

State police at Frackville said inmate Shawn Breeden of Philadelphia, who is serving a life term for first-degree murder, hit Duffy in the head with a telephone and garbage can before being restrained by other officers.

Duffy was flown by helicopter to Geisinger Hospital in Danville, where he got 12 to 15 staples on the right side of his head and stitches underneath. Duffy also had a crushed little finger and bruises and scrapes. He is recovering at home.

Mahanoy has had 15 attacks this year, according to the union.

"SCI Mahanoy is a tinderbox waiting to happen," McNany said.

He said two Mahanoy inmates threatened guards Tuesday. "They said, 'Duffy got his, you are going to get yours.'"

He also said the union has asked the state for pictures of the assault, but they have been refused so far.