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DANIEL WEBSTER



# NEW HAMPSHIRE UNION LEADER

☆ GREATER MANCHESTER EDITION

UnionLeader.com



UnionLeader



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Tuesday, March 27, 2018

Vol. 155, No. 305 • 28 Pages • Price \$1.25

## State cuts ribbon on new women's prison

■ **In Concord:** Effort to build new facility dates back to lawsuit over lack of parity with men's prison facilities and programs.

By **DAVE SOLOMON**  
New Hampshire Union Leader

**CONCORD** — The state's new \$50 million prison for women opened for business on Monday, much to the delight of Department of Corrections officials, politicians and assorted VIPs on hand for the ribbon-cutting.

But those likely to benefit most

from the state-of-the-art facility were not present. The 146 female inmates now housed at the former county jail in Goffstown are no doubt looking forward to the move.

Between now and July 1, they'll transition from a cramped and outdated jail to a modern prison designed with a focus on rehabilitation, not punishment.

"We know so many offenders are incarcerated because of behavioral health issues or substance abuse or some kind of trauma that most of us hope to never have to encounter in our lives," said U.S. Sen. Maggie Hassan, who was serving as governor when construction began.

"Our correction facilities need to speak to that, to recognize the human beings for not only what they have done, the crimes they

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Corrections Department Capt. Nicky Plante conducts a tour of the new women's prison for U.S. Sen. Maggie Hassan and other dignitaries in Concord on Monday.

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Flanked by U.S. Rep. Ann Kuster and Sen. Maggie Hassan on the left and Corrections Commissioner Helen Hanks on the right, Warden Joanne Fortier and Gov. Chris Sununu cut the ribbon to open the new state prison for women in Concord.

### Prison

have committed, but for who they are and perhaps what they could be."

The new prison has three times the space of the current women's prison in Goffstown. The new facility has 224 beds; the Goffstown facility was designed for 104 but currently houses more than 140 inmates.

#### A long journey

The new construction, near the men's prison in Concord, marks the end of a long journey that began when the state was first sued over its lack of adequate facilities for jailing women more than 30 years ago.



The new state prison for women in Concord is more than three times the size of the current facility in Goffstown.

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The state first tried to address the situation by adapting the Goffstown jail, but New Hampshire Legal Assistance brought a class-action lawsuit in 2011, claiming that programs, services and training available at Goffstown were nowhere near what men were getting at Berlin and Concord prisons.

In 2016, Hassan and the Legislature agreed on funding for construction of a new prison for women that was supposed to be ready for occupancy in the fall of 2017, but the Department of Corrections needed more time to recruit the necessary staff for the new building.

"I'm very excited that it's here and looking forward to moving into this facility," said DOC Commissioner Helen Hanks. "We're staffed up to move Goffstown, as it is, to this facility." Those inmates will be moved between now and July 1, so that the Goffstown move is completed by the end of the state's fiscal year on June 30, said Hanks.

The DOC is still recruiting another 17 corrections officers and 20-plus nurses, teachers and counselors needed before it can move women from the minimum-security halfway house at Shea Farm in Concord and from the Strafford County

Jail.

#### Big improvement

At the new prison, most inmates will be housed in the general population block, with two bunks per unit. That'll be a big improvement from Goffstown, where women are now housed in dormitory-like spaces with eight to 26 inmates per dorm.

In addition to the two general-population cell blocks, the prison also has a minimum-security unit for prisoners transitioning back to society, and a secure-management unit for inmates at the greatest risk of harming themselves or others.

A state-of-the-art security system includes 271 cameras with monitoring stations at key locations in each block.

Moving from 30,000 square feet in the aging Goffstown prison to 101,000 square feet of new construction has opened up all sorts of opportunities.

Inmates will be able to take advantage of a new gymnasium and basketball court; a softball field; and community garden with 16 raised planting beds.

Career training at Goffstown consisted of two programs, while the new prison has the capacity to offer ev-

erything from culinary arts to cosmetology, and other high-demand vocations like manufacturing, inventory control and warehouse technology.

#### Long time coming

Inmates for the first time will have a chapel and an infirmary with 24-hour nurse supervision. They'll be cooking and serving their own meals in a sparkling new commercial kitchen, doing laundry in a high-tech laundry room, and visiting family in a "Family Connection Center" that includes a children's room.

"I think everyone is so excited that the facility is finally open. It's not just a jail; it's not just a prison; it's really about better outcomes for these women who finally have a place of hope and dignity with real programming and job training," said Gov. Chris Sununu.

Rep. Ann McLane Kuster commended Elliott Berry, managing attorney for the Manchester office of NH Legal Assistance, for the work of his agency in representing female inmates over the years of legal action.

"It's been a long time in coming, and it's long overdue," she said.

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