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PRISONS FAULTED ON COMBATING AIDS

National Panel Sees Wasted
Chance for Treating and
Educating Inmates

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 28 — While prisons have more people infected with AIDS than any other public institution, the National Commission on AIDS said today, prison officials have wasted an opportunity to treat and educate those inmates.

The commission said in a report that there was "negligible transmission" of the disease in prisons, but that a large number of prisoners brought the disease to prison. Two to six percent of all inmates are infected, as against just one-tenth of 1 percent for the nation's population as a whole.

In some areas, the rate is still higher. In New York State prisons, about 17 percent of all prisoners are infected with the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS.

Dr. June Osborn, chairwoman of the commission, whose 15 members are appointed by either the President or Congress, said that in their visits

to prisons and in research, commission members were struck by the opportunity being wasted in prison.

"People in prison include many high-risk people," she said. And contrary to the view "that we lock people in jail and throw away the key," she said, the average length of stay in the state prison in Fishkill, N.Y., for example, is 18 months.

"People in prison will be coming out again soon, and these are the people who have the hardest time getting access to care outside prison," she said. "They are the ones who get the least education on this issue. We have been squandering a major public health opportunity."

She said education and prevention programs, including peer counseling and distribution of condoms in prison, could play an important role in checking the spread of AIDS.

Recommendations of Panel

The commission's recommendations include these:

¶The Public Health Service should develop guidelines for prevention and treatment of AIDS and related disease in all jails and prisons.

¶Drug treatment on demand should be made available both inside and outside prisons, since drug use is a major means of transmitting AIDS.

¶AIDS education and prevention programs should be mandatory for all new prison inmates as well as staff members. AIDS testing and counseling should be available to all prisoners.

'A Very Wide Brush'

Theodore Hammett, a senior analyst for Abt Associates, a social policy research firm, said there were about 700,000 prisoners in Federal and state prisons, and about an equal number in city and county jails.

James B. Plateau, a spokesman for the New York State Department of Correctional Services, said the commission report "paints an entire system nationwide with a very wide brush, and assigns to every prison some assumptions that may not be true in a great many cases."

He said New York was one of the first states to adopt AIDS-designated treatment wards, the first system in the nation to contract with an outside hospital to operate such a unit, and one of the first to use the drug AZT to treat prisoners infected with AIDS.

About two-thirds of the state prison system's annual health budget of \$100 million is spent for AIDS treatment, he said.