

# THE DAILY TIMES

A GANNETT COMPANY

Sunday, August 12, 2012

[ delmarva  com ]

Salisbury, Md.

## Change in counting inmates won't be felt fully this year

By Deborah Gates

Staff Writer

WESTOVER — Somerset County's population recently shrank by 10 percent, a reduction that reflects the removal of inmates at the medium-security Eastern Correctional Institution — a nonvoting, majority black population that some said should have never been counted in the county's election District 1.

Despite the November election, the relatively new state law that excludes inmates in voting district counts likely won't be fully measured until 2014, when candidates are elected again in most local races, including Somerset County Commissioners.

"Before, the prison dominated District 1, but the vote-eligible population was really small," said Deborah Jeon, legal director at the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland. The ACLU, with support from the Somerset County NAACP, lobbied for years for a change in voter district boundaries that would reflect the actual population of adults who were potential eligible voters.

"Now, there are two majority black county commissioner districts without prisoners included. Before, there were 3,000 people counted as living

in the district — who couldn't vote and couldn't run for office."

Changes also have resulted in a new redistricting map approved earlier this year by Somerset County Commissioners that redraws district boundaries and creates two minority voting districts — 1 and 2 — with majority black voting-age populations.

District 1, which stretches from Princess Anne southward to Westover where ECI is located, was a minority district before the boundary adjustment. The new map moves portions of Districts 2 and 3 into District 1 to achieve a 56.6 percent minority population. District 2 now has a 58.12 percent minority population.

Removing the estimated 3,000 ECI population for the first time since the prison opened in 1987 is a huge victory for ACLU and minorities, Jeon said.

"It is a fair system now," she said. "I wasn't here in '87 when the prison opened, but I was here in 1990 and it was on my radar screen that something in Somerset was amiss. It didn't seem to be working fairly. We began to focus on the prison and the effect of the prison on the election."

In 2010, Somerset County elected its first black person to the board of County

Commissioners — even with ECI inmates included in the population count. But Jeon said the exclusion of inmates is a fair and accurate reflection of the true adult population that influences the drawing of voter district boundaries — and the outcome of elections.

Jeon said even with the minority District 1, efforts to elect the Rev. Craig Mathies as the county's first black Commissioner took hard work and strategy. The next round of county elections will be under a law that evens the playing field for minority candidates.

"Mathies was elected, but it took how long? Twenty years to get it done and it shouldn't be that hard to achieve a fair result," Jeon said.

ECI Warden Kathleen S. Green said inmates do not vote while incarcerated, but they are involved in a program that assists them in obtaining a birth certificate, a Social Security card and an identification card, the latter a required document to vote in Maryland.

"Counting them at their real homes instead of creating a false situation was pretending they were part of Somerset County when actually they weren't," Jeon said.

*dgates@dmg.gannett.com*  
410-845-4641

*On Twitter@DTDeborahGates*