A conversation with Gary Maynard secretary of public safety and correction
by Margie Hyslop | Staff Writer

Gary D. Maynard came to the Department of Public Safety and Correction in January, and within weeks closed the House of Correction in Jessup, a troubled, outmoded, 129-year-old prison, and moved more than 800 prisoners.

A veteran of more than 30 years in corrections who most recently ran Iowa’s prisons, Maynard said he was attracted to Maryland’s system because it is more complicated and challenging.

Maynard, who holds a master’s in rehabilitation from Oklahoma State University, manages a department with more than 11,800 employees and a budget of more than $1 billion, which is used largely to house, feed and manage the equivalent of a small city of inmates (about 23,000) in 26 facilities across the state.

The department also handles Baltimore city’s jail - making it the only state correctional agency in the nation to operate a large-city correctional system.

To make it easier for many staffers who live in Baltimore to get to work in Jessup, the department plans to start a shuttle service.

The department’s divisions also oversee probation and parole, run the state sex offender registry, set officer training standards and audit local jails across the state.

Maynard, 64, lives in Towson with his wife and has one son. He talked to The Gazette’s Margie Hyslop at his office in Towson on Tuesday about his goals for the department, prisoners and public safety. The interview has been edited for clarity and space.

Q: What made you decide to take this job?

A: [Maryland] is recognized as one of the toughest systems in the country [because of] gangs, violence. No other system [in the nation] had two officers killed in the same year.

Q: What’s a good day like in one of the most troubled prison systems in the nation?

A: We have a very simple mission: Protect the public, the employees and the offenders.

If somebody is released from prison and they don’t create another victim because of something we did, then the public is protected.

It’s my feeling we can’t really take care of offenders and cause change without taking care of our own staff.

Q: What are root causes of problems in Maryland’s prisons?

A: The House of Corrections [where cells were so out of date that doors had to be locked manually and inmates were expected to lock their own doors, where walkways between cells were so narrow that officers could not avoid assault by prisoners and where staff was so short that officers were often held to work 16-hour shifts] was obviously a big, big problem, but the rest of the system is not.

Q: Was there a failure of leadership? Isn’t there an oversight or accreditation group that could have required change?
Maryland is the only state in the country has legislation that precludes [spending state money on] accreditation by the American Correctional Association [of which Maynard is president]. ... I am going to talk about that from now on. We have a Maryland commission on accreditation. They do a good job, but it’s not national accreditation.

Q: Being tied up somewhat in state politics, does the state commission lack distance?

A: Right.

Q: Is a more collaborative relationship developing with the unions?

A: Yes [starting by working with union leaders in closing the House of Corrections]. They’ve been good to work with. Whether it’s advocacy groups, unions, legislators, citizens or the media, I’m always open to communicate with people about the system. It’s the best way to approach the issues that we have. They’re real live problems that affect people, and they’re not going away.

Q: What are your top priorities, short time and long term?

A: We have a gang problem in the prison, jail, probation and parole. That impacts public safety, employee safety and offender safety. People inside the prison communicate with people on the streets ... and in the system.

I’m going to try to develop a strategy, involving other [jurisdictions and agencies] to deal with the issue. Our gang issue [which is tied to drugs] here is more serious than in the majority of states.

Q: Why?

A: Being on the coast, close to D.C. and Baltimore and [interstate] highways.

We also have a priority for prison re-entry [see Page A-1] including education. Key elements are drug [treatment and avoidance], education and work, parenting skills, anger reduction and access to social services.

Also, leadership development [for staff within the department].