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10/09



January 6, 2010

Senate President John Cullerton
Speaker Michael J. Madigan
Capitol Building
Springfield, IL 62706

VIA FAX

Dear President Cullerton and Speaker Madigan:

I write today on behalf of our union's 11,000 members employed by the Illinois Department of Corrections to express my extreme concern over recent developments in the state prison system.

As you know, for years AFSCME has raised concerns about reckless budget cuts, mismanagement and neglect that have left state prisons severely short of staff—even as they are jammed with 45,000 inmates in facilities built to hold just 32,000. We have sounded the alarm about rising violence that puts at risk the safety of employees, inmates and the general public.

Today, the situation is much worse. Recent events and news reports reveal a system spiraling out of control. Yet Governor Pat Quinn's most substantive action has been to create new appointees answerable solely to him—including an individual entirely lacking any relevant experience or credentials in corrections or law enforcement as a "special administrator for IDOC ... to assist in the day-to-day management of the agency". This response is wholly inadequate on its face.

That is why AFSCME Council 31 today urges you to convene a special joint task force, including legislators from both parties and both chambers, to answer urgent questions about the administration of the corrections department.

Specifically, we are alarmed by the premature release of nearly 2,000 inmates through two IDOC initiatives—one conducted in secret—that have put violent and repeat offenders back in Illinois communities, despite pledges to the contrary. News reports indicate that many of these individuals have already committed new crimes.

Under the secret program, called MGT Push, inmates were credited with "time off for good behavior the day they step into prison, before they've had a chance to display any behavior at all," according to The Associated Press.

Now, more than two weeks after the secret program was revealed, we still know almost nothing about how it was conceived, designed, approved or implemented. The

public deserves a full accounting of who in IDOC management or the governor's office authorized or was aware of the MGT Push program.

In addition, the administration should explain how, even under the previous good-time policy, inmates such as Lee Cration could be paroled despite what the Chicago Sun-Times called "an extensive history of violence [in prison], including assaulting staff." Cration, a murderer released to parole in November 2008, is charged with the Christmas Eve killing of a retired employee of the Illinois Department of Economic Security on Chicago's South Side.

Properly administered, a program of earned good time is an important element of the criminal justice system. Inmates should feel that appropriate behavior while incarcerated will be rewarded. Such incentives help to maintain control inside the prison walls.

But under MGT Push, good time appears to have been handed out irrespective of the inmate's actual behavior or the dangers that inmate might present to the community. Apart from achieving some insignificant budget savings, it seems the central rationale for this and the concurrent electronic detention program was to artificially drive down the inmate population and justify the governor's threatened layoff of more than 1,000 prison employees. Now, although the governor has suspended the premature-release programs, he has taken no action to ensure state prisons have sufficient staff to maintain control.

AFSCME has argued in court that such layoffs would pose a health and safety risk to our members, who would consequently be left to work in prisons even more desperately short of staff—and thus dangerous—than they are today.

And there is no question that state prisons are increasingly dangerous. The starkest reminder of that fact was the December 14 incident at Pinckneyville Correctional Center in which an inmate armed with a shank—a crude, improvised, sharpened piece of metal—took an employee hostage in the prison library and held her for more than seven frightening hours before a tactical team stormed the library and shot the inmate to death.

According to the president of the AFSCME local union that represents Pinckneyville employees, that inmate had been found with a shank less than four months earlier, but due to lack of space in the segregation unit—a unit the department recently halved in size—had already been returned to the general population. And most glaringly, a facility-wide shakedown for contraband was never conducted.

The hostage-taking, while a particularly heinous example of violence toward staff, was not an isolated incident. Recent months have seen shots fired to quell a fight at Hill

Correctional Center, yet the facility was not locked down. Shanks and a cell phone were found on inmates at Dixon Correctional Center yet no full shakedown was performed. A shank and a note describing how to incapacitate an officer and escape were found at Pontiac Correctional Center with no subsequent shakedown. And a male correctional officer was choked by an inmate and a female officer was injured breaking up a fight between gang members in separate incidents at Illinois River Correctional Center, among other examples.

In addition, in the space of two weeks in January 2009, a Pontiac inmate knocked a correctional sergeant unconscious, changed into his uniform and attempted to escape; two inmates at the Dixon Springs work camp used a fire extinguisher to attack an officer, smash out a window and escape; and an inmate at the Logan prison who refused to take his prescribed medication lodged himself in a utility closet, obtained a razor and repeatedly slashed himself with it—then struck an officer who confronted him. Several officers were required to restrain the inmate and end the attack.

These disturbing outbreaks of violence come as frontline IDOC employment has been slashed by more than 25 percent since 2002, while the inmate population has held steady or increased. Due to lack of staff, IDOC spends more than \$60 million annually on overtime—a fivefold increase from 2002. The state is seeking to sell the Thomson prison, which was built to relieve overcrowding in maximum-security facilities. And the department's premature-release programs have added some 2,000 more parolees to the 35,000 offenders already on parole statewide—without any increase in the alarmingly small ranks of IDOC parole officers, of which there are just 400.

These crises cannot be allowed to fester. Past patterns of cuts, mismanagement and neglect must not be repeated.

The legislature has both the power to oversee the operation of state prisons, and the responsibility to serve as a co-equal check on the executive branch. In that capacity, I urge you to appoint a special joint task force to seek answers to these mushrooming scandals for the benefit of the people of Illinois.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Henry Bayer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Henry Bayer
Executive Director
AFSCME Council 31