

Legislature steps in to prisons dispute

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The Alaska Legislature is stepping into the internal bickering in the state's prisons that has reached a feverish pitch.

Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage, is calling for an investigation by the Legislative Budget and Audit Committee to find the truth behind allegations of disease, understaffing and dangerous overcrowding.

At the same time, Sen. Hollis French, D-Anchorage, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said he will conduct a public hearing later this month.

The administration and correctional officers have been in a tizzy for months over prison conditions and personnel issues. The feud peaked last month when unionized guards passed a "vote of no confidence" in Commissioner Joe Schmidt.

The bad blood between Schmidt and the prison guard union runs deep and highlights the stresses of a growing prison population and the new direction and methodology of the commissioner.

Schmidt said he's looking forward to the hearing and the audit. He wants to go under the microscope to prove his competency and show that much of the allegations coming from the union are overblown, he said.

"This is a chance for the facts to get the public," he said. "And the fact that lawmakers are getting involved in the discussion is a positive thing."

The prison guard union, the Alaska Correctional Officers Association, also applauded the lawmaker's efforts to investigate.

The audit, which still needs to be approved by the Budget and Audit Committee, could take a year to complete.

To temper some disputes in the immediate future, the Judiciary Committee hearing will take place on May 27 in Anchorage, French said. Schmidt and his top staff will likely speak, as well as union representatives. The meeting is open to the public.

"It seemed to me it was time for both sides to come together in the public," French said. He's concerned that the courts could step in, as they did in the 1980s when prisoners sued over jail conditions.

Business manager of the union, Brad Wilson, said that at the very least, he hopes the audit forces the department to track the presence of MRSA, a dangerous staph infection, that prisoners and guards have said is rampant. Schmidt, and his chief medical director, Dr. Henry Luban, have said it is present but not at problematic levels that deserve special attention.

"We've heard reports of understaffing and of a contagious drug-resistant disease that is rampant in our prison system," Wielechowski said. "This presents a dangerous health risk to our correction officers and to all Alaskans. As public servants, we have a responsibility to look into these matters."

UNDER FIRE

Schmidt has come under fire with the no-confidence vote and a critical op-ed column from Marc Antrim, the previous commissioner.

Gov. Sarah Palin, who appointed Schmidt in late 2006, said she continues to support Schmidt. If an audit reveals the need for improvements, Schmidt will address them.

The rift between the commissioner and some of his staff has turned into rampant rumors and disputes over basic facts about what's going on in the jails and prisons.

Both sides agree Alaska's prison population has continued to grow for years, mirroring a national trend. That coupled with recently passed tougher sentencing laws, has swelled the populations in the prisons. The average number of offenders in prison on any given day in 2004 was about 4,800. Currently, it is about 5,400.

When Schmidt, a career state Department of Corrections employee, became commissioner he decided to take the department in a new direction, he said. In addition to plans to add beds to existing prisons and building a new prison in Mat-Su, he began looking at the staggering number of prisoners - three out of five - who are released but end up back in jail for a new crime. His focus is on changing how Alaska looks at prisons from a punitive system to a rehabilitative one. He says this has rubbed the old prison guard culture the wrong way.

AnchoragejailprisonerBruce McQuade, currently waiting his trial on robbery and assault charges, said he's noticed a change since he was last doing time in the late 1990s and early 2000s in Alaska.

"They are not going around cleaning the jail like they used to," he said, in a phone interview on Friday.

Most noticeable, though, he said are the makeshift beds on the floors of prison cells, expanding two-person cells to three-person ones. In his cell, it filled most of the floor and he tripped on it, injuring his leg.

"It's just become dangerous in here," he said.

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