

Union is to blame for prison dispute

COMPASS: *Other points of view*

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I am retiring after 30 years of public service with the Department of Corrections. I would like Alaskans to know the story behind the efforts of the corrections officers union to have Commissioner Joe Schmidt fired.

Throughout my career I have witnessed the daily sacrifice our officers make each day to ensure continued public safety. They work 12-hour shifts, seven days a week among the most dangerous criminals in the state of Alaska.

In any organization there are staffers who are not worthy to retain their job. The fewest number often generate the greatest publicity and the loudest complaints of being treated unfairly.

Disciplinary actions are often a response to egregious behavior that jeopardizes the safety of others and must remain confidential to ensure the rights of all concerned. State officials do not have the luxury of discussing outcomes of personnel actions publicly. The inability to respond allows opposing views to create explanations that may not tell the whole story. There is always more to the story. Sometimes officers have retained their jobs due to technical errors, similar to that found in a court of law.

Commissioner Schmidt has attempted to hold people responsible for their behavior. I have watched his career from the beginning, as well as his father before him. He has spent his career caring about others and any attempt to paint him otherwise is a blatant lie.

It is the clear intent of the union to "co-manage" the Department of Corrections. It wanted to dictate the agenda and do so in an adversarial manner. Commissioner Schmidt rightfully refused to conduct business in such a manner.

The union has chosen a smear campaign and has blitzed correctional staff with such propaganda that it would be difficult to know the truth. If strife and discourse is the best representation the union has to offer, that is unfortunate for Alaska's correctional officers who deserve the best.

Commissioner Schmidt will continue to do the best job possible. A new prison will begin construction to alleviate overcrowding. Reinstating programs to provide basic skills to prisoners will make a difference in some who are released from custody. Staff will remain accountable and responsible while ensuring proven safe correctional practices are continued.

No question, there are problems to solve. The union has announced that it will not meet with Commissioner Schmidt. I will hope for a more mature solution for the sake of the officers they represent.