

Legislature wants investigation into DOC

Vote to audit state's prison system

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Lawmakers say the only way to get to the bottom of the accusations surrounding state jails is to demand the answers.

Over the last few months, there have been serious allegations against the State Department of Corrections about a Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) outbreak and severe overcrowding.

The Legislature wants an investigation. Now that the Legislature has voted to audit the state's prison system, it will open up the Department of Corrections to an in-depth investigation. The auditor will examine sealed records and documents and conduct one-on-one interviews with jail officials and inmates to try to get to the bottom of what is really going on behind bars.

Allegations of disease outbreak and overcrowding in the state's prisons are what lawmakers are set to investigate.

"If we are hearing reports that there is a problem in this department, because we are the ones who allocate money to it, we are tasked with investigating it to see if there is a problem and if there is, we need to solve it," said Senator Bill Wielechowski (D), Anchorage.

Though the commissioner of the department of corrections declined an interview today, he has told us he welcomes the investigation.

"Getting more information to the public is never a bad thing. We stand strongly behind the direction we are going. We think it is the best for the public; and we think we are running a clean, safe organization," said Commissioner Joe Schmidt of the Department of Corrections.

The Legislature is not going to tackle MRSA yet, but they will investigate the allegations of severe overcrowding.

The corrections officers' union says it's about time.

"We wish this was done more quietly. We wish it had been done by the governor, but we took what route we had to take to get it done," said Brad Wilson of the Alaska Correctional Officer's Association.

The overcrowding investigation has been green-lit. But the state auditor says an investigation into MRSA is tricky, because there are little to no records kept about disease and its impacts on prisoners.

"I've had reports that there are hundreds of inmates that have it. I've had reports that corrections officers have got it, that corrections officers have given it to their families. It's a safety issue," said Senator Wielechowski.

Prison officials say they are doing what they can to keep MRSA under control.

"What we do is manage the situation. And I believe we manage it the best we possibly can right now. And if the investigation turns up things that we can do different or better, than that's what we are going to do," said Commissioner Schmidt.

Now it will be up to the auditor to figure out if any problems are there and to try to fix them. The auditor is going to work with the Department of Corrections to figure out if there is a way to track MRSA or not.

The soonest that the actual audit can start is in five to six months. In the meantime, the Legislature will hold hearings on the issues to get more information.

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