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Corrections allegations continue



ACC was built to house 853 inmates but now holds far more. (Dan Carpenter/KTUU-TV)

by Sean Doogan
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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- The allegations just won't stop coming from disgruntled employees and prison inmates, all directed at the state Department of Corrections.

Overcrowded prisons, a drug-resistant skin infection being passed around the prisoner population and a no-confidence vote for Commissioner Joe Schmidt are among the problems the state agency faces.

And the department is under fire from the union representing prison guards.

Everyone agrees Alaska's jails are filled beyond capacity. But there are differing opinions about whether the state is doing enough to keep the facilities safe and clean.

KTUU Channel 2 News toured the Anchorage Correctional Complex Thursday to observe the issues firsthand.

ACC was built to house 853 inmates but now holds far more. There are more inmates than ever at the complex, which currently houses about 1,000 inmates and is officially operating at 130 more than capacity.

Department of Corrections Deputy Commissioner Bryan Brandenburg compared ACC's statistics to those recommended by the national Bureau of Justice.

"We are currently at 744 (officers), which is what we have on the floor today, and as of July 1 we'll be funded for 786 positions," said Bryan Brandenburg, Deputy Commissioner of Corrections. "We won't be able to fill those as of July 1, but we are going to be actively working toward that goal."

But the Alaska Correctional Officers Association, which represents officers, says the state is reducing the number of guards patrolling the jails.

"The minimums are either staying the same and there's more inmates, or the minimums are dropping and there's more inmates," said Brad Wilson, ACOA's business manager.

Corrections officials cite national averages in their comparison: in 2006, the nationwide median was one guard for every 6.7 inmates, according to the Bureau of Justice.

Alaska's average for 2006 was less than one guard per five



Deputy Commissioner of Corrections
Bryan Brandenburg (Dan Carpenter/KTUU-TV)



Corrections officers union business
manager Brad Wilson (Dan Carpenter/KTUU-TV)



DOC Clinical Director Rebecca Bingham
(Dan Carpenter/KTUU-TV)



DOC Commissioner Joe Schmidt (KTUU-TV)

inmates, a number that is similar, in ways, to other small state prison systems.

Connecticut, for example has a ratio of one guard to every 4.6 inmates. Vermont and Rhode Island have a ratio of one guard per 3.5 inmates.

Inmates and guards say the overcrowding is not the only problem inside the jail.

Some claim that MRSA, a drug-resistant staph infection, is rampant behind bars in Anchorage.

But corrections officials refute that claim.

"Once they are in here as long as the institution is keeping things relatively clean and the inmates and officers are washing their hands frequently, it really has a much lower level than the outside," said Rebecca Bingham, clinical director for state corrections.

Bingham said though the DOC doesn't track cases of MRSA, she believes there are four unconfirmed cases of the infection.

A recent vote of no confidence in DOC commissioner Joe Schmidt highlights the growing rift between the administration and its union.

The state says it is doing its best to keep the jails clean and safe.

Union officials claim the state is taking "too many chances" behind these walls.

Union officials say their recent claims of understaffing and the no-confidence vote in Commissioner Schmidt are not a negotiation tactic, rather, they claim that they actually believe the issues will hurt them when negotiations begin.

Contract negotiations begin between the correction officers union and the state in September.

Contact Sean Doogan at sdoogan@ktuu.com



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