

Lawmakers get earful at meeting on prisons

ACRIMONY: Guards allege that administrators don't take their safety seriously.

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Corrections officers packed a downtown Anchorage meeting room to standing room only and applauded when Fairbanks Republican Rep. Jay Ramras publicly admonished Corrections commissioner Joe Schmidt.

"I have never, never heard a commissioner speak so disparagingly of the people who work for him," Ramras said. "It is hurtful to morale."

That's how it went at a Senate Judiciary Committee meeting Tuesday where lawmakers witnessed firsthand the tensions between the state's prison administrators and its guards and listened to allegations of mismanagement of the department.

At one point, Committee Chairman Sen. Hollis French, D-Anchorage, interrupted a round of clapping to tell the crowd of officers their behavior was inappropriate.

"Gentlemen, we are going to have order," he said, raising his voice slightly. "Let the gentleman (Schmidt) speak."

The Alaska Correctional Officers Association and top brass of the department played point-counterpoint in front of a dozen lawmakers with 50 or so corrections officers looking on, one towing three children playing video games. Sen. Lesil McGuire, R-Anchorage, compared it to a family feud.

The guards say the administrators are not doing enough to keep them safe in the state's overcrowded prisons. They say the department is not hiring enough guards and won't acknowledge dangerous health issues, like constant exposure to MRSA, a difficult-to-treat staph infection.

Schmidt and his deputy commissioners claim the union is playing dirty to get what it wants: more control over the department and its management.

Schmidt says he has made a lot of difficult changes since being appointed at the end of 2006 -- reducing overtime, promoting rehabilitation programs, and pushing aggressively

for ways to reduce costs and the state's staggering 60 percent of offenders who end up back in jail. Gov. Sarah Palin has said he has her support.

While the Legislature last session approved funding for more officers and the department is consistent with national averages in its ratios of guards to prisoners, the number of inmates is growing and is predicted to continue to grow as a result of tough-on-crime laws. More prison space is being built, but not fast enough to keep up with the forecast growth.

The internal bickering between the union and administration reached a crescendo in April when the union passed a no-confidence vote against Schmidt.

At the Tuesday hearing, Ramras told Schmidt he shouldn't have publicly said the union was "bullying" him or using "threatening" tactics.

Schmidt, who makes up in plain-speak what he lacks in political correctness, was a career corrections officer before Palin promoted him to the top post.

"I felt bullied and that's what I said," he told Ramras.

The acrimony went on for four hours. Afterwards, Schmidt said he had extended the olive branch to the union several times since tensions started building about six months ago. The union has refused to meet with him to hash out issues, he said. "They just need to come to the table."

McGuire, who recently toured the Fairbanks prison, said the overcrowding and high number of prisoners per guard is creating a dangerous level of fear in the institutions -- among both prisoners and guards. "You have a real potential for something catastrophic to happen," she said outside the meeting.

"Unless you sentence someone to life, you have to accept at the outset that they are coming back to our community," said McGuire. "Punishing people is important. Housing them is important. Rehabilitating them is important."

Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage, has called for an investigation by the Legislative Budget and Audit Committee to find the truth behind the union allegations.