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Union weighs in against corrections commissioner

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) -- State corrections officers overwhelmingly registered disapproval of their commissioner's leadership in a union vote on Tuesday.

Of the 550 union members who weighed in, 96 percent voted "no confidence" in state Corrections Commissioner Joe Schmidt. The Alaska Correctional Officers Association has 700 members total.

Members of the 4-year-old union said they are concerned about understaffing, wrongful terminations, overcrowding and health concerns in Alaska jails.

"It just goes to show you the anger and resentment that has been brewing in the ranks across the state because of the conditions we have been forced to submit to," said union president Danny Colang, a sergeant at the Fairbanks Correctional Center.

Schmidt, however, said the vote is the result of an aggressive and nasty union campaign in which he chose not to engage.

"We are functioning, but we could obviously function a lot better," said Schmidt. "I want to welcome them back to the table when they stop this behavior, and I can do that more effectively if I'm not down in the mud wrestling with them."

Schmidt said he's made big changes in the department, with greater emphasis placed on prisoners' substance abuse treatment and community reintegration to cut down on recidivism.

At the same time, Schmidt said he's made sure the prisons are filled to capacity by counting all the beds in the system, including those housed in converted gyms.

Colang said that while inmate counts have increased under Schmidt's management, the number of officers on duty at any one time is being cut back.

"It's no longer a matter of if someone will get hurt, it's a matter of when," said Colang.

Schmidt said relations have been strained with the union since he ordered 49 internal investigations, 26 of which ended in disciplinary actions, during his first year.

"You could call that reform," Schmidt said.

The union has asked Gov. Sarah Palin, who appointed Schmidt, to launch a full investigation. But Palin issued a statement late Tuesday voicing her "unconditional support" for the commissioner.

"Commissioner Schmidt has my full support as he and his team continue to bring remarkable reforms to the Department of Corrections," Palin said.

The department has 1,500 employees and houses 11,000 prisoners.

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