

Department of Corrections: Pennsylvania Corrections secretary responds to PSCOA's call for superintendent resignation.

Text of March 2 press release.

CAMP HILL, Pa. -- In response to Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association (PSCOA) President Donald G. McNany's call for the resignation of SCI Mahanoy Superintendent Ed Klem, Corrections Secretary Jeffrey A. Beard, Ph.D., made the following statement:

"PSCOA's call for a superintendent's resignation in this matter is unfounded, inappropriate and unsupported by the Department of Corrections.

For quite some time, we have been hearing from PSCOA as they use inflated figures and twist facts in an attempt to scare the public into thinking that the state's prisons are not safe or secure. Today, as a result of an incident at the State Correctional Institution (SCI) at Mahanoy over the weekend, PSCOA is calling for the resignation of a 33-year DOC veteran.

I want to assure the citizens of this Commonwealth that this prison system is secure, safe and humane.

Yes, prisons have the potential to be dangerous places because we are dealing with offenders, some of who are dangerous people. But citizens also need to know that a majority of the assaults that PSCOA speaks of actually take place in our prisons' restricted housing units (RHUs). These are highly managed, segregated units within our prisons where inmates who break prison rules are sent for a period of time for disciplinary reasons.

It is in these restricted housing units that 70 percent of all assaults take place; and 41 percent of all assaults are throwing incidents - incidents in which inmates throw urine or other bodily fluids at officers and other staff as they deliver meals to the inmates in their cells. About half of all assaults in the RHU occur during times when staff has to use force upon an inmate for a variety of reasons. These units are appropriately staffed to deal with these offenders who are housed there.

The assaults are not happening because we do not have enough staff or officers. An increase in officer positions would not reduce these types of assaults.

In reality, assaults within the state prison system are down 21 percent, as there were 191 fewer last year than the year before. SCI Mahanoy's assault numbers are in line with the decrease being experienced throughout the state prison system.

The Department takes every assault seriously and reviews each assault to determine its cause and whether there are ways to reduce such assaults. As noted, we are seeing a reduction in assaults. We are seeing reductions because we are providing officers with

additional and improved training and procedures to assist them in their day-to-day dealings with inmates. In addition, the Department has provided officers in its restricted housing units - again, the place where most assaults occur - with hardware that protects them from throwing incidents.

PSCOA claims that the Department's inmate population has increased by more than 8,500 inmates, or 26 percent, since 2001. The reality is that we have experienced an actual increase of 3,800 inmates (or less than 10 percent) since 2001. While this is a significant increase, it is not quite as dramatic as portrayed by PSCOA.

Staffing has also kept pace with the inmate population, as we are much better staffed today than we were in the 1980's and early 1990's. Our staffing ratios are also better than most other states and the federal Bureau of Prisons.

With respect to this recent serious assault at SCI Mahanoy, I have reviewed the situation, just as I do with all assaults or special incidents that take place in our state prisons.

Assaults, while unfortunate, are a part of the dangerous job faced by corrections officers every day. Some assaults require parts of or even an entire facility to be 'locked down.' In this specific incident at SCI Mahanoy, there was no evidence that any other inmates were involved. The weapons used were weapons of opportunity - a telephone, a trash can. Inmates in the area at the time of the incident were cooperative with staff. There also was no indication that the use of weapons or weapons finds are increasing at Mahanoy. If any of these were to the contrary, then a lock down or other actions may have been appropriate.

Each of our 15,000 dedicated employees work hard to prevent serious incidents and assaults from occurring and to provide for the public's safety. However, despite all efforts to try and prevent incidents from happening through staff vigilance, improved training and enhanced equipment, we cannot eliminate such incidents from occurring altogether. We must remember that we are working with offenders - individuals who have been incarcerated for not being able to follow the rules and regulations of our society. Some of them can be difficult to work with and pose challenges.

On the other hand, our prisons are not so overcrowded and so understaffed that serious problems are imminent. We have received, and we continue to receive, the staff and the resources that we need to securely, safely and humanely operate our facilities. The situation today is nothing like what this Department faced in the 1980's during a time when there were serious riots. If it were, I would be among the first people to raise alarm."

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SOURCE: Pennsylvania Department of Corrections