

After attack, Mahanoy prison guards plead for staff
Incident was 15th this year at prison. Union asks state to fill all positions.

By Bob Laylo
Of The Morning Call

A recent attack on a guard by a Mahanoy State Prison inmate was the facility's 15th this year, and the union that represents guards has joined a state representative in saying it points out the danger of prison understaffing statewide.

Donald G. McNany, Pennsylvania State Corrections Officer Association president, urged lawmakers to approve a Senate bill requiring the Department of Corrections to fill all vacant guard positions in the state.

There have been about 40 attacks on guards this year across the state, and the union says lack of staff is a chief cause.

McNany also said Mahanoy's superintendent should resign or be fired for calling the incident isolated and refusing to lock down the prison after the attack.

Mahanoy Superintendent Edward Klem's "failure to act decisively sends a clear message to inmates that seriously injuring an officer won't lead to widespread corrective action," McNany said.

Klem has been Mahanoy superintendent since 1999.

Mahanoy prison spokesman Ed Martin answered a call at Klem's office and referred questions to the Corrections Department's office in Harrisburg.

A spokeswoman in Harrisburg said Secretary of Corrections Jeffrey A. Beard was drafting a response to the union's concerns and would release it in a day or two.

The union's complaints were prompted by an attack Friday on Mahanoy corrections officer Joseph Duffy.

State police at Frackville said inmate Shawn Breeden of Philadelphia, who is serving a life term for first-degree murder, hit Duffy in the head with a telephone and garbage can before being restrained by other officers.

Duffy was flown by helicopter to Geisinger Hospital in Danville, where he got 12 to 15 staples on the right side of his head and stitches underneath. Duffy also had a crushed little finger and bruises and scrapes.

Roy Pinto, eastern region vice president for the union, said the attack came when Breeden and other inmates were given time to watch television or play cards or checkers instead of going out into the cold recreation yard.

Pinto said Duffy told Breeden to stop being disruptive before the attack.

Duffy was released from the hospital Saturday and is recovering at home, Pinto said.

The union says Mahanoy has had, by far, the most attacks this year among the state's prisons.

Pinto said attacks at Mahanoy, which has about 300 corrections officers, ranged from inmates throwing unknown substances at officers to a head butt to an attack with a bite.

Pinto said when inmates throw something at officers, it is usually urine.

But there have been multiple attacks at several prisons, including seven at Frackville and four in Albion, Erie County. Rockview, Centre County, Dallas, Luzerne County, and Graterford have had one each, according to the union.

Pinto said three guards are being tested after HIV-infected inmates spit on them or attacked them with a needle.

"In my 13 years as a corrections officer, I have never seen so many vicious attacks on officers," McNany said.

Last year, Pinto said, a Mahanoy guard patrolling alone was stabbed in the neck.

Pinto said changes in the system, such as giving inmates heart healthy meals with smaller portions or phasing out commissaries, leads to attacks, But he said the chief cause is lack of staff.

The union said about 200 corrections officer positions funded in the state budget were not filled last year in cost-saving measures. It called on lawmakers to approve Senate Bill 362, written by state Sen. James Rhoades, R-Schuylkill.

Efforts to reach Rhoades, whose district includes Mahanoy, were unsuccessful Tuesday.

The union says the bill doesn't create jobs, but requires that all corrections officers positions funded in the budget be filled. The union said the jobs need to be filled because of a constantly increasing prison population.

From 2001 through mid-2004, the number of prisoners increased from 32,173 to 40,697, or about 26 percent, while the number of corrections officers increased from 7,045 to 7,551, or 7 percent.

State Republican Party House Whip David Argall said Tuesday he plans to reintroduce a bill similar to Rhoades' that would beef up prison staff.

Argall, whose 124th District includes part of Schuylkill County, said that legislation overwhelmingly passed the House but did not get through the Senate.

"It would put specific relief factor values into the law, with the goal being we would have certain shifts better covered at the institutions than they are today," Argall said.

He said the amount of staff varies by shift, with fewer officers working overnight or on weekends. He also said the state has lost some corrections officers because they are members of the military reserve or National Guard and were called to duty.

The union says it hopes the additional staff will come soon.

"If it's one thing that inmates understand, it's a numbers advantage," McNany said. "Something must be done before an officer is killed."

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