

Lawmakers agree to hold hearing on youth prison

► *One state legislator wants quarterly reports to keep a closer eye on the facility.*

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

State legislators will hold a hearing this summer at the Michigan Youth Correctional Facility in response to a Press investigation that found the private prison was ill-equipped to handle young prisoners.

State Rep. Charles LaSata, R-St. Joseph, chairman of the House Appropriations corrections subcommittee, said he also will ask the state prison system for quarterly reports on the youth prison, instead of the now-required yearly reports.

"I'm equally concerned with the safety of corrections officers as well as the inmates at the facility," said LaSata, whose subcommittee oversees the budget of the state Department of Corrections.

"I think the situation at the facility warrants further review and attention. We need to delve into this further."

LaSata is the second state lawmaker to call for hearings in response to The Press investigation.

State Sen. William VanRegenmorter, R-Georgetown Township, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said he has not scheduled a hearing, but he met this week with the director of the state prison system and questioned him about conditions at the youth prison. He said he hopes to tour the prison next week.

In a five-month investigation into the treatment of juveniles in prison, The Press found the youth prison, where the state sends most of its juveniles sentenced as adults, is more violent than the state's six maximum-security prisons. Young inmates attack one another and guards and try to kill themselves, according to prison reports obtained by The Press.

Some guards said they feared for their lives and claimed the prison was understaffed, sometimes forcing them to work 70-hour weeks.

While other maximum-security prisons had about one guard for every two inmates, the youth prison had one for every three

prisoners.

In the stories published last week, The Press also reported that the prison, owned and operated by Wackenhut Corrections Corp. of Florida, has operated since it opened in July without counseling programs required in its state contract.

At a hearing this week before LaSata's House subcommittee, legislators said they planned to keep a closer eye on the youth prison.

"This is an extremely important issue," LaSata said. "Our goal is to make sure they (Wackenhut officials) are following the contract."

Rep. Mike Prusi, D-Negaunee, said he had immediate concerns and questioned Michigan Youth Correctional Facility Warden David Trippett, who was called before the subcommittee this week.

Prusi said he was concerned about staff shortages and reports of 70-hour workweeks.

Trippett said a 70-hour week "is rare," and overtime is voluntary.

He said guards had worked, on average, 4.7 hours a week in overtime.

But guard Kevin McDaniel, president of the new union

representing guards at the prison, said long hours still are not unusual because of a shortage of guards.

On Wednesday night, for the third time in two weeks, McDaniel worked a voluntary 16-hour shift, he said.

The prison, he said, continues to lose employees.

Of the 72 people in the first class of guards, 31 are left, he said. About 20 quit before the prison opened, and the rest later quit or were fired, he said.

Other classes have since graduated, and a class of 40 is being trained. The prison has about 100 corrections officers, he said.

Many of those who remain are proud of the prison, he said.

"The officers are getting more seasoned. They're getting used to the games played on them (by inmates). They're more confident in what they can do and what they can't do for an inmate."

Trippett said the facility is 20 guards short, but there are only 330 inmates, not 450 as envisioned in the contract. He said he agrees with Corrections Director Bill Martin's decision not to send more inmates until more staff is hired.

Press Lansing Bureau reporter Judy Putnam contributed to this report.



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