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## 'Inviting Trouble?' Attacks at Portage prison blamed on staff shortages

Jonathan Stefonek [jstefonek@capitalnewspapers.com](mailto:jstefonek@capitalnewspapers.com) 608-745-3510 Jul 31, 2015

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Columbia Correctional Institution in Portage has struggled to retain guards and other personnel in recent years.



**An inmate at Columbia Correctional Institution in May used a pencil to stab a corrections officer. Another inmate was charged, in the same month, with the attempted murder of a librarian using makeshift scissors.**

**And yet another incident later in the month at the Portage prison resulted in an ambulance call and an inmate being transferred to the University of Wisconsin Hospital for special care. Details have yet to be released. This followed inmate Dexter Ewing being charged with strangling his**



Havlovic

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Who watches the watchmen? Not clear what agency in charge of safety at CCI

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At CCI: 'People are leaving us left and right'

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cellmate to death on Feb. 12.

“It used to be that CCI was the most secure and the best prison in the state,” said Faye Hart, a recently retired 18-year veteran of CCI, whose posts included six years in the prison’s segregation unit, which houses the most dangerous inmates. “I saw a lot of very bad things. And we would get inmates that nobody else in the state could handle. We were the most secured and trained. Well, that is not the case anymore.”

Hart left in February, retiring earlier than she had planned, but she says she feels compelled to speak up for the staff and inmates, most of whom don’t have the same opportunity to speak openly about problems at the prison. She said she left because she was frustrated with work conditions at the prison.

Hers is just one voice of concern among many that have been increasingly heard in recent months. Others include current staff and inmates.

The Portage Daily Register received an unsolicited letter from a man serving a sentence for armed robbery, which opens: “I write as a prisoner of CCI requesting that you’ll take notice of dangerous conditions here, which are the direct consequence of the severe and worsening staff shortages.”

Hart estimated the current staffing to be between 75 and 80 people short. Sgt. Dale Paul, a correctional officer at CCI, said he thinks the shortage is “at least 50, if not more.”

## A look inside

According to CCI's annual report for 2014, the institution employs 247 uniformed staff and 95 non-uniformed staff. If the prison is short 50 employees from 2014, that would mean it is operating with 7 percent fewer employees this year.

According to a June 12 email provided by Department of Corrections Director of Public Affairs Joy Staab, CCI had 53 vacancies for correctional officers and sergeants as of May 16. By comparison, there were 15 similar openings a year earlier. Officers and sergeants are the two frontline positions for guards. As the first managerial rank, if something goes wrong with an officer, blame tends to fall on the nearest sergeant. From there the ranks go up to lieutenant, captain and then just below the administrators are the four unit managers.

The DOC announced the graduation of 86 new recruits from its officer pre-service training program on May 22, with 21 of them assigned to CCI. That would apparently leave 31 remaining openings at the Portage prison.

“Clearly staff fatigue and well-being is a priority for the Department so we have also looked for alternatives and non-standard solutions to assist the current employees,” Staab wrote.

CCI's 2014 annual report also lists the prison's capacity as 541 inmates. Next to that, the population is listed as 839. Among Wisconsin's 18 most secure prisons, only Prairie d Chien reports a population that does not exceed operating capacity — there it appears to be exactly at capacity.

Over the past 10 years, CCI's inmate population has risen from 820 to 839. This has been a steady increase with the exception of the years 2009 and 2011, when the population dipped by three and 14, respectively.

The CCI warden's office has declined repeated interview requests. Calls to Sandra Hautamaki, CCI deputy warden and CCI community relations representative, have also not been answered. Any requests for information have been referred to Staab's office in Madison.

## Emergencies

When there are emergencies at CCI, there are primarily two places calls will go: the Columbia County Sheriff's Office and Divine Savior Healthcare. Officers with the Sheriff's Office will escort prisoners, for instance, from their cells to court dates and back. If there is an incident at the prison, the Sheriff's Office is tasked with investigation.

If there is a medical emergency, officers will escort inmates traveling by ambulance to and from Divine Savior Healthcare in Portage.

Days after a CCI guard was attacked by an inmate with a pencil in May, there was talk of another incident involving two inmates — severe enough that someone had to be transported by Med Flight. Questions to the Sheriff's Office have gone unanswered and nothing matching the rumored incident appeared in Columbia County Circuit Court records. According to Columbia County District Attorney Jane Kohlwey, both incidents are under investigation.

A Divine Savior staff member did say that someone arrived

for emergency services from CCI and that person was then transferred to the University of Wisconsin Hospital for specialty care. The hospitals could not provide a status update for patients without knowing at least a full name.

## Community relations

CCI provides a public face, building relationships with local authorities and community leadership through its Community Relations Board.

The board, according to CCI's 2014 annual report, include 10 members. Five of the listed members are connected to the Federal Correctional Institution in Oxford. At the top of the list is Warden Robert Werlinger, although Werlinger was not available for comment, according to Oxford's administrator, not having been with the institution in more than a year.

The other five listed board members are Portage Mayor Bill Tierney; Police Chief Ken Manthey; Columbia County Director of Emergency Management Services Patrick Beghin; District 8 Alderman Marty Havlovic; and Sue Trimmer, Madison Area Technical College.

Trimmer didn't know why her name was on the list, except for having filled in for a colleague at a meeting last year.

Other board members had a clearer sense of the committee, but none gave a description that matched what appeared on the annual report.

The last meeting was on Dec. 4, Havlovic said after checking his calendar.

“I think it’s about 15 to 20 of us that have attended those meetings,” he said. “They hold an open house-type meeting, where they talk about issues of concern and activities at CCI.”

Since the doors opened in 1986, CCI has drawn a lot of water from Portage. This has been one of the handful of direct benefits to the city from an otherwise isolated organization — sale of water and sewage services to the prison. CCI’s water and sewage bill for 2014 came in at \$251,710.13.

“They are very open in their conversations,” said Tierney, “and they are one of our biggest utility users — of water and sewage — which isn’t hard to believe when you consider both how many people are housed there and their staffing profile.”

Between the time the city of Portage openly solicited to be the home of a planned new maximum security prison in 1979 and its opening in 1986, there were strong arguments for and against with prolonged lobbying campaigns to the city and the state, as well as an entrenched opposition movement.

Primary areas of concern were whether the prison would deliver on bringing new jobs to Portage, results of the environmental impact study and the influx of new residents who would move to be near incarcerated family members.

One issue raised by the pro-prison promotional committee was an insistence on stadium lights, which although not

aesthetically appealing, would help guards in the towers keep an eye on the perimeter.

Among the problems former employee Hart found troubling at CCI, there was also talk that the administration was considering removing officers from the prison towers during the overnight shift from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. On May 19 the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee agreed to a proposal by Gov. Scott Walker to reduce third-shift guard tower staffing statewide for a savings of \$5.9 million over two years. The proposal was included in the final budget signed into law by Walker. It will eliminate 60 DOC positions statewide for a savings of \$2.6 million in 2016 and \$3.5 million in 2017.

"I think we need to bear in mind that the facility was built — how many years ago?" said Tierney. "And technology has changed tremendously in that time frame."

State Assembly Corrections Committee Co-Chairwoman Rep. Janel Brandtjen, R- Menomonee Falls, stressed that the move is an issue of re-assigning assets.

"You're looking at the differences in technology that really allow the facility to be more safe with less personnel," Brandtjen said. "I think the changes would be for five people for that facility, but it's not like they would be removing five people — because it's a 24-7 facility. It just means that instead of those five people sitting in the tower — which most facilities now don't even use towers — you have the electronic fences with razor wire on it; you have the ground patrol; you have the perimeter technology."

The chairman of the Assembly committee, Rep. Rob Hutton, R-Brookfield, has not been available to answer questions.

The state budget proposes the elimination of corrections positions, Portage City Administrator Shawn Murphy noted, with Portage looking at the elimination of about 12 positions at CCI for its share of the statewide cuts.

Staab says there is no plan to eliminate jobs at CCI. However, the budget would eliminate open positions that wouldn't get filled. She wasn't sure about the figure of 12, but did not dismiss it.

## Security

The security of CCI's fencing system was one of the original questions raised by opponents. In a February 1980 editorial, by then-editor Mary Sandok, the Portage Daily Register addressed this along with other issues and apparent misconceptions about the proposed prison.

"That the prison's surveillance system would be the same as systems during World War II, as Leo Frederick, co-chairman of the association, contended, is so absurd it seems pointless to comment on it," the Daily Register wrote. "Frederick's source for his allegation that snow, rain and fog would affect the system is apparently his WWII experience. For what it's worth, a state prison official — Steve Kronzer — told me last week that those elements would not put the system out of service."

Whether inclement weather affects the reliability of CCI's systems, the fence system has been plagued with problems.

according to some sources.

“That fence goes down all the time,” Hart said. “And main control has an alarm and the towers have alarms so they have to reset it, and it shows on there and I would call a couple times: I said, ‘It looks like the fence is down.’

‘Oh, no it isn’t.’

‘Well, it sure looks like it from here.’

“And there would be more than one of us calling, and finally they would check it, they would do a test. And sure enough, it was down,” she said.

Paul, a current CCI officer, was less concerned about the fencing, but still, confirmed that there is at the least a margin of error, for instance, if a bird lands in the wrong place and gets fried, briefly knocking out the fence’s sensors.

“The question you have to ask is, if the state’s going to cut your budget, how are you going to staff a prison?”

Alderman Havlovic said. “So instead of 25 guards you have 20 — where do I put them that makes sense as far as protection and that?”

“I would hate to be in that position,” Havlovic said, “because once you’re reducing the numbers, you’re only inviting trouble.”

The DOC is quick to point out that no one has escaped from CCI. This is likely the first and maybe the only thing that will come to mind for most people considering the

security of a prison.

The escape of two convicted murderers from Clinton Correctional Facility in Upstate New York on June 5 brought the issue to the nation's attention. At least one prison employee stands accused of aiding the escape. One of the fugitives was killed in a confrontation with officers in a massive manhunt three weeks later and the second was shot and wounded days later.

When Paul thought about the tower issue, his focus went to whether this will make it easier for someone to get contraband inside while the inmates are locked in their cells for the night.

"They can get all kinds of contraband over those fences because nobody's going to see them," Paul said. "Could be drugs, could be a weapon, whether it's a pistol or a knife that they could be chucking into the back side of the recreation field over there. And we've got people out there all the time."

If something went over or through the fence during the night, an inmate would then be able to wander over to where the contraband landed and pick it up. The guards might yell, "Hey, get away from the fence!" And the inmate would just say, "Oh, sorry, I wasn't paying attention and walk away with whatever it was that got through," Paul said.

Hypothetical situations aside, the concern for Hart, Paul and his wife, June, is regarding what is already available to inmates who aren't getting the full attention they were

intended — because of fewer staff.

June Paul already had an idea that there might be disorganization in the prison after getting accustomed to taking calls about Dale's upcoming work schedule and letting CCI officials know when he would be willing and able to work. He didn't answer the phone because he would be at work at CCI at the time of the calls.

Then there were the times when she said Paul would come home disturbed by the lack of action — unwillingness to let officers do their job properly.

“He would be frustrated finding a fork or something, silverware or the towel count would be off,” she said. “When he brought this up to supervisors, the answer seemed to consistently be ‘Oh, that doesn't matter.’”

“Then an inmate hangs himself — does it matter now?” she said. “They don't understand.”

## Lockdown

After the inmate was flown to Madison for emergency specialty care in May, CCI was put on lockdown while officers conducted a search of cells and investigated the incident. No charges have been filed and the incident remains under investigation, District Attorney Jane Kohlwey said.

On June 9, Staab said CCI was “kind of” off lockdown. “You can't just turn it on and turn it off,” she said. During normal operation, groups of prisoners can move between different areas with minimal restrictions during large

portions of the day. During lockdown, anyone who comes out of their cells gets handcuffed first, then escorted. Meals are served to just six inmates at a time. There are no visits to the library, there is not time in the recreation area.

Many conversations on this topic start with recognizing that at the best of times, the work of a prison guard is difficult and hazardous. Paul explained how in his hiring process, there was a two-week trial and if the person couldn't "hack it" then that was it, and the person went home with no real negative reflection on the person's character.

Hart talked about things she has seen in the years of her career: prisoners cutting themselves, suicide attempts and other things that, at times, led officers to walk away from the job at the end of their shift.

"There are far greater concerns than my loss of recreation, library access, time out of cell, agitation or impending lawsuits," one inmate wrote. "There have been talks of riot and the general atmosphere has a feeling of rising disconcertion, like a pressure cooker ready to pop."