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DOC chief questions CCI staff concerns

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The Department of Corrections said Thursday that starting June 26, all correctional officers, sergeants and youth counselors will receive 80 cents more an hour in the hopes of boosting recruiting and retention.

The head of the state Department of Corrections, Edward F. Wall, met Thursday in Madison with two area lawmakers to discuss concerns of under-staffing, over-working, and growing violence at Columbia Correctional Institution and other Wisconsin prisons.

State Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Middleton, and Rep. Dave Considine, D-Baraboo, called for the meeting following a Sept. 8 listening session with CCI staff members in Portage. Wall

agreed to a meeting, though not at the Capitol, and with about 10 other senior Corrections staff present.

Erpenbach and Considine were joined at Thursday's meeting by a staff member. As they waited, Erpenbach made clear his willingness to immediately walk if the meeting turned out to be a PowerPoint presentation.

Assistant Deputy Secretary Don Friske greeted the visitors and told a Portage Daily Register reporter "We're not prepared for the press," and denied entry.

Legislators having trouble getting direct answers from the DOC is not unprecedented, as Sen. Jennifer Shilling, D-La Crosse, explained.

"Back in 2013, when many of these issues were starting to develop, I worked with Senator Dale Schultz (who retired in 2015) and we tried to get a tour of the prison down in Prairie du Chien so we could see the conditions and talk to the corrections officers who were working there. At the time we were told that we could take the tour, but we wouldn't be allowed to talk to any of the employees at their posts."

The concerns that Shilling wanted to check out were similar to those aired by staff at CCI: safety concerns, staff training, equipment use and reliability, and collapsing posts — when management eliminates a position due to budget cuts.

"There were a lot of things that seem like they were minimal, that could have been addressed at the time," said Shilling referring to an example of the confusion that came out of inadequate training during a change in the DOC's computer system. "But they haven't and they fester, and it is going to take a lot of work to improve the workplace safety at these facilities and get staffing back up to where they should be and to restore the trust of correctional officers."

Wall has indicated that the problems at CCI and other Wisconsin facilities can be traced to "attitude problems" among the staff, according to staff and internal emails. Staff have reported that when concerns are brought to the attention of CCI Warden Michael Dittmar the standard response is: "There are 1,000 people out there waiting to take your job."

Recently, DOC staff informed Erpenbach's office of all-day mandatory training sessions in Madison, one of which took place Sept. 3. At the session, according to an officer who spoke on the condition of anonymity, and confirmed by others, "Secretary Wall in addressing the entire room went on to state (five or six times), 'If you don't go along with the direction we are headed, I will make you disappear.'" When asked about the criteria he was talking about, the officer reported that, "Secretary Wall stated, 'I can make it happen just like that.' (And he snapped his fingers.) Secretary Wall offered no explanation at this or any other time as to the meaning of these threats."

The formal topic of the training session was reportedly workplace bullying. The officer said that it ended with another round of threats and finger-snapping.

According to Julie Laundrie, an Erpenbach staff member, reports from the following session were more toned down — still including threats to staff, but less dramatically.

After an hour and a half on Thursday, the delegation returned to the DOC lobby to sign out and debrief outside.

"The door is open now, and I think that's good," said Considine. "I just talked with Warde Dittman and he said, 'Stop in any time.' And I'm going to take him up on that. And then they're going to invite us to some of the safety meetings and some of the committee meetings."

CCI has a 10-member Community Relations Board including five members from the Oxford Federal Correctional Institution, five members from local Portage government and emergency services, and a staff member of the Madison Area Technical College-Portage Campus. The board has met infrequently and irregularly, with the purpose described as more of an informational venue, than a way for local concerns to be translated to any new policy.

"But I don't know if there was concrete resolution to anything that was coming out of this aside from that Dave and I can go to the meetings," said Erpenbach. "Legislatively, we'll do whatever we can to try to get more money for pay. They're supposed to be coming out with a new pay ... a greater something soon, but they can't say when."

The Columbia Correctional Institution Annual Report 2015 (July 1, 2014 – June 30, 2015) begins with an introduction by Dittman: “During this reporting period, CCI has experienced schedule modifications, assignment modifications and an increasing difficulty to attract and retain new staff.”

It goes on in the following paragraph to say, “The vacancy issue, unfortunately, will not stabilize in the near future; however, local efforts and efforts by the Secretary’s Office continue to chip away at vacancy numbers and will not cease until we restore our assigned staff strength number.”

“They’re more concerned about hiring because they can’t retain,” said Erpenbach.” It’s just a matter of numbers. If we hire 1,000 and 500 will stay — awesome. But again, the issue is they’re more concerned about filling the openings than they are about hanging on to who they have.”

During Thursday’s meeting, Wall confirmed reports that CCI would soon be missing a captain, lieutenant, program services director, education director and human resources director. They were described as unavoidable promotions.

When Laundrie suggested that a reasonable expectation of forced overtime policies remaining unchanged would be further retirements exceeding the post-Act 10 exodus of 2011, Wall’s response was, “I don’t care. Let them go.”