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State pen's problems surface during summer heat

Joe Vitek, head of the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services, has his hands full.

In an interview with The Lincoln Star earlier this week, Vitek outlined the problems at the state penitentiary that have kept him in the spotlight since July 2.

In the space of two weeks there has occurred: one hanging, apparently suicide; one attempted suicide; one inmate death, possibly from electrocution; two stabbings by inmates; and a protest in the recreation yard of the pen by over 100 inmates.

The protest was related to in part to the death of inmate Shawn Sparks, 16, who apparently was electrocuted by a faulty electric fan in his cell.

The irony of the situation is that Vitek allowed the inmates to have the fans in their cells "in an

attempt to make the place a little more bearable."

If anyone visits the state penitentiary these days, it should be obvious that it'll take more than electric fans to make it bearable. The structures behind the walls there are a poor parody of a modern "correctional" institution.

Vitek has a point with making electric fans available: the temperatures inside the cell blocks often soars to over 100 degrees during the summer. 19th century facilities and overcrowding threaten to make the state penitentiary a continuing problem.

But the problem isn't Vitek's. He's just doing his job, and doing it as well as he can. It's ours.

The last two weeks should be enough to convince most people that a new facility, and possibly new methods, are needed to handle

Nebraska's growing prisoner population.

The voters of this state and the legislature should stop balking at the idea of building a new correctional facility and abandoning the old one. It's a problem that has gone on too long; it can't be tucked into a corner on 14th Street any longer.

But perhaps even now some things could be changed. For example, someone should find out why a 16-year-old was put into that hellhole in the first place.

Who's willing to take the responsibility for that?

Both the eight-week and first five-week Summer Sessions end today. If you listen closely you can probably hear the sigh of relief clear across campus. For those of you who are graduating after this session, congratulations. You're out and we're not. Having the graduation ceremony in the Nebraska Union may not be as impressive as the Sports Complex, but at least it's convenient. For those of you who are continuing into the second session, you might as well face the facts. It's going to be a very short summer.

Guest opinions welcome

The *Summer Nebraskan* welcomes the submission of guest opinions by readers for publication.

The subjects of guest opinions are entirely up to the writer. However, decisions regarding publication will take into account clearness of writing, relevance of material, and length. The *Summer Nebraskan* reserves the right to

edit submissions but will retain the important points.

All opinions must be signed. No pennames will be printed.

Deadline for all guest opinions will be 9 a.m. Tuesday morning the week of publication. Copy must be typed and doubled spaced. Please try to limit opinions to three or four typed pages.

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