

New administration policies cause conflicts at York

Editor's Note: The following story was written as an assignment in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Journalism depth reporting class. The author is a senior Journalism major from Lincoln.

By Gail Reid

Nine employees and former employees of the women's reformatory at York say a change in administrations has stirred unrest among the inmates and discontent among the employees.

Since Supt. Donna Bergen officially took charge of the institution Oct. 30, 1977, some 25 employees or almost 50 percent of the staff have resigned, according to the former employees.

Bergen denied a serious problem exists but refused to say how many employees have quit. She did say those who quit indicated no animosity toward the administration.

Corrections Director Joseph Vitek said he had no figures on the turnover.

In addition to the employee complaints, two petitions have been circulated and mailed to correction officials complaining of unfair treatment, lack of communication between the administration and inmates and a lack of understanding of rules and regulations. Three inmates, separately interviewed, agreed with the charges.

Charges listed

The allegations include:

- unfair and inequitable disciplinary action, limited recreational activities, inadequate medical care and censored mail.

- minimal communication among the administration, inmates and staff, hampered knowledge of rules and regulations, use of multiple rule books and a constant onslaught of memos.

- inequitable relations between the administration and staff, including charges that decisions handed down by the Board of Inquiry have been dictated by Bergen, duties

formerly held by the staff have been taken away, reactions from the administration concerning mistakes have been overly severe and have resulted in a work atmosphere predominated by fear, reports made by inmates to Bergen concerning staff behavior have caused employees to fear for their jobs.

A number of employees interviewed said they resigned from the center because many of their administrative duties had been stripped, numerous rule and policy changes caused confusion and resentment and the tense, fearful atmosphere which existed at the reformatory made work unbearable.

No major turnover

On the question of turnover, Bergen said the employees who quit may have realized they were not suited for work in a correctional institution. Although conceding that some employees have quit, Bergen maintained that the percentage of turnover is lower since the beginning of her administration than the previous two years under former Supt. Jackie Crawford.

However, the superintendent refused to reveal the number of employees who have quit or the turnover rate percentages for the past three years.

Even though Vitek said he did not have any figures, he said the attrition rate is not beyond the normal turnover rate for a state institution.

Most of the former employees requested that their names not be used, but one ex-employee spoke for the record.

Emotionally tough

According to Chris Stephens, former kitchen supervisor at the institution, the constant pressure, the continual changes and the "mind games" were "knocking the heck out of me emotionally."

"I was not going to give up my mental health for my job," she said.

After waiting 10 months for conditions to improve at the center, one employee said she could no longer support what was happening at the institution. She quit.

The employee, who asked not to be identified, said Bergen had taken away the staff's pride by undermining its authority. She added that Bergen would not allow the employees to be individuals but required them "to be a reflection of her" and the space for individuality was getting too small.

The center does not have a mentally healthy atmosphere in which to work, she said.

And Stuart Wiley, a former instructor at the institution, said, "I see a lot of good people quitting." Possibly Bergen's administration should be investigated, he said.

Not able to cope

Responding, Bergen said the staff may have been upset about some of the changes and rule enforcements, and some of the staff may have realized they were not comfortable enforcing the Department of Correction's rules. So they quit. Because they may not have been able to cope with the responsibility required of them, they blamed the administration, she said.

Confronted with the charges by the nine former employees and three inmates, Bergen selected four employees to be interviewed.

One of them, Jean DenHereter, a correctional supervisor, said that although the dissident employees claim the trouble stems from Bergen's policies at the center, problems began even before Bergen became superintendent.

A rumor was circulated that Bergen had announced on a television program that she was going to bring her own staff with her when she took charge of the institution, she said. The staff became suspicious and fearful of Bergen, she said, and they felt they were going to lose their jobs.

Improvement seen

However, relations have improved and "I think the majority of the staff approve of most of the changes Bergen has made," she added.

Prior to joining the York reformatory's staff, Bergen was employed at the Kansas Reception and Diagnostic Center in Topeka, Kan., for seven years. Bergen was hired to replace Crawford, who resigned to accept a position at the Arizona Women's Correctional facility.

When Bergen took charge of the institution many of the employees felt she was unapproachable, DenHereter said.

Little communication existed between the staff and the administration and employees received no feedback in regard to their performance, one former employee complained. The superintendent conducted only one staff meeting with the correctional officers in the last year, another employee charged.

The inmates in their petition also claimed Bergen would not meet with them or confront their problems. Although the inmates requested several times to hold a group meeting with the superintendent, she would not face them, the three inmates said.

Communicating time-consuming

However, Bergen claims she has had a hard time getting her work done because she is busy communicating with the public, staff and inmates. Staff meetings are held every Monday and hall meetings are conducted when they are necessary, she said.

"And inmates and staff members are always welcome in my office," she said.

Although Bergen says her office is often swarming with inmates and staff members, when she first arrived she would not attend meetings requested by inmates because she was new and was not prepared to face them, DenHereter said. She does hold hall meetings now, and communication among the administration, staff and inmates has improved, she said.

Memos detailing rules and regulations did not improve communication, and only increased the confusion surrounding the three rule books, which were in use, the inmates and former employees said.

Memo rules

There was a time when three rule books were used and rule changes distributed in the form of memos, a former employee said. Inmates were charged, or "written-up," for infractions of the rules from any of the books or memos, she said.

Neither the inmates nor the staff could keep abreast of the rule changes although they were often posted in the halls, Stephens said.

"Rules seemed to be changed daily," she said. The rules, which were circulated in memo form, could be interpreted in various ways, one employee said, and the superintendent would explain the rules one way to one employee and a different way to another.

Because the Department of Corrections has been in the process of revising rule books, three rule books, the hall rules, the center's rules and the Department of Correction's rules had to be used, Bergen said.

Rules available

Because changes may have referred only to one hall or to the center, rules had to be distributed in memo form.

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