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Union reps dispute Manson Youth Institution assault report

By: Jesse Buchanan , Record-Journal staff

CHESHIRE - The Department of Correction contends a study that found an average increase of inmate-on-staff assaults in state prisons does not apply to Manson Youth Institution, in the Cheshire prison complex.

The General Assembly's Public Safety Committee Tuesday released the study, which looked at the past several years. The Department of Correction said Manson has experienced a decrease in assaults.

Class 1 and Class 2 assaults-on-staff by inmates at Manson Youth Institute in 2008 have been the lowest since 2004, although the assaults listed for this year are only through October. The monthly average in 2008 is also the lowest since 2004.

Cheshire prison union representatives responded that only counting Class 1 and Class 2 assaults, which include weapons, does not give an accurate picture of the situation at Manson. Class 3 incidents are those without weapons, and are not included in the state report.

"From a global perspective, the (state) report confirms what we've been saying all along," said Larry Dorman, a spokesman for Council 4, which represents three unions at Manson, including American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 387.

"The working conditions have become more dangerous and volatile," he said.

Dorman said that inmate-on-staff assaults are not the only measure of a facility's safety. Manson correction officer and executive board member of the AFSCME Local 387 Moises Padilla said staff also can be injured responding to fights among inmates, or other emergencies.

According to a department review of Manson, there were 129 Class 3 incidents in August, 176 in September and 122 in October. Padilla, a member of the task force that performed the state study, was disappointed that Class 3 incidents were left out of the report.

"You can't discuss one aspect of the incidents and ignore the Class 3 incidents," he said.

The review also said 18 Manson employees were out of work and receiving worker's compensation in August, 18 in September and 28 in October. Padilla said many of those injured were hurt responding to Class 3 incidents. Those incidents were caused by the increase in inmate movement within Manson, he said.

"We work this institution - we know what transpires in the institution," he said. "More out-of-cell time equals more inmate-on-inmate assaults."

The task force on prison safety was created by state Rep. James Amann, D-Milford, in July to investigate reports of inmate assaults on officers. Several correction officers were severely hurt in attacks in early July.

AFSCME Local 387 held a press conference in November to air its complaints about changed policies at Manson, which it said have made conditions more dangerous for staff and inmates.

Union officials have criticized Manson Warden Christine Whidden for implementing policies that allow too many inmates out of their cells at one time without sufficient supervision. Dorman said morale among the prison staff also has declined.

Department spokesman Brian Garnett said the department has confidence in Whidden and supports her policies. Manson and prisons statewide would review the committee's report, though.

"We'll be working with the legislature to see if any changes need to be made to our policies," Garnett said.

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