

Union Asks Outside Review Of Prison Brass

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In a strongly worded letter delivered Thursday to the governor and state attorney general, union leaders representing 5,000 correction employees criticized the head of the state Department of Correction and asked for an independent probe of the department's management practices, including the agency's policies for investigating its employees.

Written by three presidents of the AFSCME locals at the Connecticut Corrections Employees union — Thomas Miles of Local 387; Jon Pepe of Local 391 and Luke Leone of Local 1565 — the letter described a culture at the agency that allows upper management and favoritism to influence internal investigations of staff members.

"Our members are angry and fearful," the letter says. "They believe that some staff have been targeted [or not] based on who they are, and what relationships they have

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within the [Department of Correction]. ... Our members specifically are concerned that during these investigative activities, exculpatory facts are omitted, distorted and in some cases destroyed. They are concerned that [Department of Correction] investigators, at the direction of upper management, have exceeded the scope of their statutory authority while conducting investigations outside prison walls."

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said the concerns raised in the letter are "very serious and substantial and certainly are entitled to a very prompt review as potential whistle blower complaints."

Union representatives said they have specific examples that support their allegations but are waiting to discuss them first with Gov. M. Jodi Rell and Blumenthal.

A spokesman for Rell said the governor's office had received the letter and she is asking her legal counsel to review it.

Brian Garnett, spokesman for the Department of Correction, said Correction Commissioner Theresa Lantz was not available for comment. He said the security division handles a variety of investigations, including investigating inmate complaints as well as staff. In 2005, the unit conducted 176 investigations, with 112 on a broad range of allegations involving staff misconduct. Garnett said those investigations could involve any of the nearly 7,000 employees who work for the department, not just the 5,000 members of the AFSCME locals.

"The Department of Correction conducts investigations involving its staff in a fair and ethical manner with conclusions dictated solely by the facts of each case," Garnett said.

But union representatives say they have taken their concerns to the administration to no avail and that the department has created a stifling environment that has one set of standards for its upper man-

agement and another standard for everyone else. They say their concerns mirror that of the state police, which brought in New York State Police to conduct an inquiry into allegations of questionable tactics by its internal affairs unit. That probe is ongoing.

The hope, Pepe said, is that an outside agency would bring a "transparency to what the security division does and a more even-handed approach." Pepe added that correction employees understand the need for internal investigations, but they want them to be conducted fairly and impartially.

"We don't object to being held to a standard, but everyone should be held to the same standard," said Gene Tewksbury, vice president of AFSCME Local 1565 of the Connecticut Corrections Employees.

Union representatives said the correction department's actions are destroying morale and that security division investigations reach far beyond the prisons and into their off-duty lives. They allege that security division investigators have videotaped public events such as charity functions.

Pepe said the investigation involving a correction officer's association with the Outlaws Motorcycle Club is an example of an investigation in which the security division unit reached beyond its boundaries, videotaping an Outlaws barbecue at a clubhouse in Waterbury. A correction officer was fired in 2004 for allegedly being less than truthful during that investigation but a state arbitrator ruled this year the state fired him without just cause, claiming he had lied to investigators but actually terminated him because of his involvement with the Outlaws. The arbitrator also ruled the officer will get his job back.

If something doesn't change, Pepe said, it will "only empower the [Department of Correction] to continue these unethical activities and give them a sense that they're above the law and their own directives."