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Prison guards' union officials seek state investigation

By Max Heuer

Journal Inquirer

Leaders of the state prison guards' union are calling for an independent investigation of the Correction Department's management, complaining of "appalling and unethical treatment" of employees in a stinging letter to Gov. M. Jodi Rell and Attorney General Richard Blumenthal.

The letter, signed by three presidents of local union chapters, says prison workers are "angry and fearful" after some investigations have omitted, distorted, and "in some cases destroyed" exculpatory facts.

Union members "believe that some staff have been targeted (or not) based on who they are, and what relationships they have within the DOC," the letter says.

"They are concerned that DOC investigators, at the direction of upper management, have exceeded the scope of their statutory authority while conducting investigations outside prison walls and in our communities."

Jon T. Pepe, a co-signer of the letter and president of AFSCME Local 391 — the state prison employees

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Blumenthal to talk with 'individual whistleblowers'

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union — said Friday that union leaders began airing their concerns "about the stigma of upper management taking care of their own" and "violating their own directives" to Correction Department Commissioner Theresa Lantz when she took office in May 2003.

The letter names both Lantz and Deputy Commissioner Brian Murphy in claiming upper management has "unduly influenced" the department's internal affairs unit.

"They're not taking it seriously," Pepe said. "They do an overview of themselves and they don't find anything wrong."

External Affairs Director Brian Garnett responded to the letter Friday, saying the department has "every faith" in its investigative process.

"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. "The commissioner and her staff are and have always been available to union leadership to discuss any specific concerns or review any documentation that they would like to bring forward."

"We have had a open door and ongoing dialogue with the union administrations since the beginning of the commissioner's administration," Garnett said.

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said Friday that "the concerns raised in the letter are very serious and substantial and certainly merit very close and prompt review."

"I will be reaching out to the union officials and speaking with any of the individual whistleblowers who have claims about wrongdoing or improper conduct," Blumenthal said. "I will be consulting with the auditors to determine whether a whistleblower investigation is appropriate."

Whistleblower status is a special legal protection that protects state employees from retaliation if they report, in good faith, any irregularities.

"These claims seem to involve the core functions and responsibilities of the Correction Department so we need to assess and review them immediately," Blumenthal said.

A spokesman for the governor, Adam Liegeot, said Friday that Rell had received the union's letter and forwarded it to her legal counsel, Kevin Rasch, for review.

Larry Dorman, a spokesman for the prison guard's union, said the union was not releasing detailed information about specific cases at this time "to be respectful of the process in terms of getting the governor and the attorney general involved."

"We want to make sure our members aren't going to suffer retribution," Dorman said.

He added that a recent decision by

a state arbitrator ordering the Correction Department to rehire a guard it had fired for being "less than truthful" during an investigation into the guard's affiliation with the Outlaws Motorcycle Club was "one example" and "is demonstrative of the concern we expressed."

The arbitrator found in her Feb. 28 ruling on the firing of the guard, Randy Sabettini, that Correction Department investigators had violated their own rules while conducting the investigation into Sabettini's affiliation with the club.

Pepe said he had been made aware of Correction Department investigators engaging in "all kinds of what I felt was unorthodox, unethical, and maybe possible illegal activity," some of which occurred outside of prisons and dealt with the personal lives of department employees.

"Their statutory powers are inside the prison walls," Pepe said. "They're acting like they're the CIA and it's really disturbing."

The letter is signed by Pepe, Local 387 President Thomas Miles, and Local 1565 President Luke Leone.