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Crime & Courts

'I thought I was gonna die'

Correctional officers speak out about recent assaults at the hands of inmates

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Harry Harrison served a tour of duty in the Vietnam War, but he never came as close to death then as he did one day in September while working as a correctional officer at the Northern Correctional Institution in Somers.

On Thursday, during a press conference at the prison employees' union office in Enfield, Harrison, 62, and Correctional Officer Pete Kuhlman, 41, spoke about the assaults they survived while working on the front lines at Northern, the state's maximum-security prison.

Harrison was assaulted in September while returning an inmate to his cell. The inmate's cellmate threw hot soup in Harrison's face, and both men punched him and knocked him down, he said.

"When I woke up, both of them were stomping on my head," he said. "If it wasn't for my partner, I'd be dead.

"I thought I was gonna die. In my mind, I said, 'I'm gonna die here on the tier,'" Harrison said.

Kuhlman was assaulted Dec. 23 while trying to remove an inmate from his cell for a routine shakedown.

"I opened the door and he hit me with what I thought was a punch," Kuhlman said. "It was a quick blow."

Only later, at the infirmary, did Kuhlman find out the inmate slashed his neck with a razor blade.

"I never saw it. I never felt it," he said of the weapon. "I was bleeding profusely, but I still didn't realize it until we were in the medical infirmary. They said there was a weapon recovered, and that's when it really hit me."

Kuhlman said it took seven staples in his neck to close the wound and that the inmate's razor came just millimeters from his jugular vein.

The surgeon who stitched him up said that if Kuhlman's neck were any less muscular, he would have died from his injuries, Kuhlman said.

"It's a sick, empty feeling," he said of the realization that the inmate was probably trying to kill him.

Neither of the men has fully recovered from their assaults.

Though he still experiences constant headaches, Harrison has returned to work at Northern Correctional Institution, but he said his duties so far have been administrative. He has not yet returned to working with the inmates.

Kuhlman has not returned to work.

His family and friends have been supportive, but he said he has difficulty sleeping at night and believes he may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"It's changed my entire life," Kuhlman said of the assault.

Both men are state Department of Correction veterans. Harrison has worked as a correctional officer for 18 years, 11 of those years at Northern. And Kuhlman has worked at the department for more than 17 years, 14 of which he has spent at Northern.

And neither is any stranger to violence in the prisons. Both officers worked at the Carl Robinson Correctional Institution in Enfield during the prison riots in the early 1990s.

"Ironically, I was standing next to the warden when he got slashed with a razor," Kuhlman said, referring to an assault in the late 1990s, when then-warden Larry Myers was slashed in the face by an inmate.

"I've been punched before. I've been in fights before. He wanted to take my life," Kuhlman said of the December assault.

Said Harrison: "I never thought it would happen to me. It always happens to somebody else."

Kuhlman and Harrison said they never noticed any prior indications that the inmates were planning to attack them.

"There was a little bit of banter. He didn't want to get shaken down," Kuhlman said of the inmate who assaulted him. "He didn't threaten me. I never saw a weapon. Procedurally, everything was by the numbers."

And Harrison added that he does not believe the attack was personally directed against him.

"I believe anyone who opened that door would have faced the same thing," he said.

Jon T. Pepe, president of AFSCME Local 391, which represents correctional staff at prisons in Enfield, Suffield, and Somers, said he feels assaults on staff are increasing.

"There have always been assaults, but usually they were assaults on other inmates. It seems more and more staff are becoming assaulted," he said.

Pepe said increased assaults on staff are a consequence of lower staffing levels at the prisons, and Kuhlman and Harrison agreed.

"Security's been lax, based on money and based on convenience," Kuhlman said.

"Our administration is pretty good now," Harrison said. "It's downtown trying to save money. They want us to do more work with less officers."

Pepe said Northern was hit especially hard by last year's early retirement incentives.

And he said the problem was compounded by the closing of the Webster Correctional Institution in Cheshire and by a failure to consistently prosecute inmates for assaults on staff.

If an inmate is already incarcerated for the rest of his life, taxpayers often don't see the point in prosecuting that inmate for assaulting a correctional officer, Pepe said.

And past lawsuits have meant the department can only restrict an inmate's privileges, such as access to the commissary, phone calls, and visits, for so long, he added.

"From an officer's point of view, it doesn't seem like anything happens," he said.

Correction Department spokesman Brian Garnett disputed Pepe's charge that staffing levels at Northern are inadequate, saying that the department graduated a new class of more than 100 correctional officers in August and that the department strictly adheres to its plan for appropriate staffing levels.

He also said the closing of Webster Correctional Institution had no effect on Northern, as Webster was a minimum-security facility.

But last Wednesday in the wake of another assault on staff, Pepe formally requested the department reopen Webster Correctional Institution and leave only level five inmates at Northern.

Levels refer to the security a particular inmate is designated as needing. Inmates labeled by the department as level five are those that need to be housed in a maximum-security facility.

On Thursday, Brian K. Murphy, acting commissioner of the Correction Department, responded to Pepe's request in a letter, making it clear that while "safety and security is a top priority" there are no plans to transfer any inmates out of Northern.

"We will continue to house the population that presently exists at Northern (Correctional Institution)," including gang members Murphy described as "an extremely dangerous and disruptive population."

Murphy wrote that the design of Northern, which was "built to house and manage the most dangerous offenders," makes it "the safest environment to house these offenders."

Pepe said that not all gang members at Northern are classified as level five inmates, and if they're so dangerous and disruptive they should be reclassified as level five. This would at least provide for better continuity when correctional officers are dealing with these inmates, he said.

Meanwhile, Kuhlman and Harrison said that to some degree, assaults are an inevitable part of the job.

Harrison said, "Whether you have two or three or four or five or six guys, if they want to assault you, they're gonna assault you. You can't stop it. You just can't stop it."

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