
A dangerous way to make a living

(Wed, Jul 30 08) - Contributed by KERNAN, JOE - Last Updated ()

By JOE KERNAN

While the trial of two prison guards charged with abusing inmates at the Rhode Island ACI has been covered in the local media for the past weeks, a corrections officer was walking around with a taped nose. It was broken while he was on duty at the ACI. Aside from friends, family and co-workers, the corrections officer's injury went unnoticed. Except for the Chief Inspector and his three staffers, the Special Investigations Unit and the State Police who will determine what happened within the walls of the prison.

As much as the abuse of inmates is inexcusable under any circumstances, the danger that correctional officers place themselves in during every shift gets little public notice. The public takes it for granted that there is someone who will keep criminals off the street and clean up the messes in the ACI and spare them the details.

"In general, corrections officers do not get the recognition they deserve," said Aaron Aldrich, the Chief Inspector for the ACI. "We have an academy that is as difficult and as rigorous as any other law enforcement academies. When you come here to work, you see men with guns in the towers and you know you are going into a hostile environment. We have some fantastic officers. Steve O'Donnell [Major], the second in command for the State Police started as a corrections officer."

Aldrich said that the dangers correction officers face are largely unknown to the public. The media is more attracted to inmates with a grievance against the guards than any indignities that are faced by them.

"You could never say that the job is without risks," said Aldrich, "but the Hollywood version is a guard getting his throat slashed and all that gory stuff. The reality is that inmates used to throw bodily fluids and spit and feces at correction officers. Before, that was just a despicable act by the inmates. When AIDS and hepatitis and HIV came along, it became a more serious thing."

Aldrich said guards are taken to the hospital immediately after an incident like that and have blood taken.

"That blood is the 'base' they take and the officer has to go back once a year to be tested. Can you imagine the anxiety that officer goes through all year? In 1997, throwing bodily fluids at an officer was made a felony. It was a misdemeanor before."

As bad as things are for guards and inmates, many people acknowledge that the ACI and its policies are far more humane than earlier prisons, with their isolation and useless work such as working on a rock pile or moving objects from one side of a yard to the other side of the yard all day. Prisons eventually became more humane and reformers began to clamor for rehabilitation along with punishment. After World War II, America became more conscious of the lives of inmates after release. The Ocean State was not immune to the calls for reform. In 1956, Rhode Island's complex of jails and prisons had its name changed from the Rhode Island State Prison to the Adult Correctional Institutions. The softer sounding new name was meant to change the emphasis away from punishment toward reform and rehabilitation.

"A wave of prison riots in the early 1950s—40 occurring over 18 months beginning in 1952—were used to buttress arguments for more treatment-oriented programs," records Leo Carroll in his *Lawful Order: A Case Study of Correctional Crisis and Reform*,

which

is the most comprehensive book about Rhode Island's prisons in print. "To emphasize its commitment to rehabilitation, the American Prison Association in 1954 changed its name to the American Correctional Association and advocated that prisons be redesignated 'correctional institutions.'"

The name did not change the basic function of prisons, which was to separate those who would commit crimes against people and property from those who would not. As an inmate in a recent television documentary put it, prisons are for "keeping bad people from doing bad things."

But some authorities claim that corrections have been getting bad press and even the rate of recidivism has been exaggerated.

"One reason why people overestimate recidivism is that they focus on offenders released from maximum security institutions and ignore all other offenders processed by the criminal justice system," said Lee H. Bowker in *Corrections: The science and the art*.

Bowker asserts that only one in 33 former inmates from maximum security commit another crime of violence. All too often, inmates vent that violence on fellow prisoners or the corrections officers.

Since the war on drugs started, our prisons are now packed to the seams with inmates, making prisoners tenser and more prone to be unbalanced than they were before. Cells that were designed for one prisoner are now holding two or more. Anyone who has not experienced that kind of enforced intimacy can only imagine how it will affect people.

"It can lead to violence," said Aldrich. "I was assaulted myself in my first year. A guy gave me a roundhouse punch and knocked me to the floor. I was lying there, looking at one shoe and wondering where the other one was. Then, like slow motion, I saw the shoe as it hit me in the mouth and took out all my bottom teeth."

As Chief Inspector, Aldrich knows exactly what officers or inmates are talking about when they talk about violence. He said a large part of his job is to gain the trust of the inmates and the officers and get to the truth.

"The inmates have a code of silence and they don't tell on other inmates," said Aldrich, "and the officers have their code of silence and won't testify against another officer. You have to get by those codes by letting them trust you."

According to Department records, there were 226 assaults against guards, most of which consisted of shoving, disobeying or resisting.

"A lot of officers decide they won't press charges on a minor assault because it means going to court and other routine stuff they rather not do," Aldrich confided.

As risky as the ACI remains, it is nothing like it was in the past, when inmates and guards got away with doing all kinds of mischief and the officers decided they needed a union of their own. The Rhode Island Brotherhood of Correctional Officers' union (RIBCO) was born in 1971.

"In an era of perpetual inmate unrest and violent challenges to their authority inside the Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI) in Cranston, beleaguered correctional officers decided to take matters into their own hands and form their own union – essentially to safeguard their own safety," says an introduction to their organization on their Web site.

“RIBCO’s relations with R.I. Department of Corrections’ management and the state have often been contentious, and contract negotiations protracted,” the introduction continues. “During the 1990s, for example, the union worked without a contract for a number of years and did not at the time receive pay raises granted to other state employees because of the impasse over the new contract. The union also fought attempts at privatization inside the ACI and a subsequent state attempt at creating privately run halfway houses around the state for inmates transitioning back to society.”

The union claims it has around 1,300 members but Aldrich said he believed the number is closer to 950.

The union, of course, says it is representing those “who work the toughest beat in the state.” Anyone who is familiar with the ACI work knows that. What Chief Inspector Aldrich wants them to know is, when there is a “significant incident” at the ACI, an investigation starts immediately; and that investigation entails three separate entities at the prison.

“First of all, there are two State Troopers on the ground from Monday to Friday who respond to the scene. The Special Investigation Unit (SIU) looks into the inmates’ side of the story and I talk to the officers,” said Aldrich. “And we all have to realize that inmates don’t always lie, and officers don’t always tell the truth.”