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Lending Integrity to an Abused System

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The Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) needs an inspection team with the authority to take action when it spots abuse as well as reward meritorious service. Abuses in our prisons can and do reach extremes.

Government audits, public commissions, and forums, such as newspapers and Kay Lee's web site "Make the Walls Transparent," regularly document and report improprieties. Governors and legislatures have systematically ignored these reports for decades.

While the American Correctional Association inspects prisons and jails in our nation, corruption and human rights abuses of the last decade have not found expression in their accreditation of Florida prisons.

The size of DOC makes it an appealing target for fraud and abuse. This organization employs more than 26,000 men and women to control nearly 90,000 inmates at a cost of over \$2 billion a year. The solution demands a preventative mechanism with a shield to withstand political tampering.

This is a proposal to implement an autonomous inspection process that improves, and guarantees the efficiency, integrity and professionalism within the ranks of DOC. The vehicle is an Operational Readiness Inspection program similar to what Gen. Curtis LeMay implemented when he commanded the Strategic Air Command. He and the inspection team appeared unannounced at a facility to examine everything from operational to administrative readiness.

The nature of Florida politics requires these inspections have transparency, autonomy and legal authority to guarantee their effectiveness and integrity.

The prison inspection team envisioned would focus on four elements; administration, security, inmates, and public input.

Public input includes the families of officers and inmates as well as the community. Families of the staff and inmates will speak to issues overlooked or buried in the current inspection process.

Investigators from Florida Department of Law Enforcement and recent graduates from law schools operating under the charter of a statewide prosecutor would augment the inspection team. Hopefully, these will be young lawyers that bring integrity, idealism and energy that only needs direction.

Imagine such a team discovering that, far from being an aberration, human rights violations are business as usual at a or in many of our prisons. While the public may hear about dramatic cases such the Valdes incident (which resulted in an inmate death), it is unlikely that they are aware of the more common abuses.

Imagine this team interviewing medical staff working in our prisons. Would they hear from doctors living on prison premises that they fear for their lives should they testify, or even tell about, the prisoner beating injuries they treat?

Why should the average citizen care? Because the treatment received by Florida prisoners is rendered in the name of the people of Florida. By failing to protect those we incarcerate, we add our indifference to the cycle of violence.

The bedrocks of human rights abuses and corruption are the ability to commit a crime without fear of punishment. You only have to look at the murder of Frank Valdes for a case in point. In spite of a few empty but dramatic gestures such as firing the correction officers charged in the murder, the bedrocks remained in place and a whole series of scandals ensued from the same complex.

Inspecting lawyers under a statewide prosecutor can break this cycle of violence and corruption by preparing the necessary charge sheets, evidence, and depositions for the State. This expedites prosecution in cases where local State's Attorneys may not be disposed to pursue legal action or are plagued with excessive caseloads.

Prisons are pressure cookers that can explode with little or no notice. Corrections Officers need to be fit enough to arrive at the disturbance quickly with the ability to evaluate the situation, report and then take action.

Testing of physical fitness and technical expertise insures the security staff is capable of meeting unexpected contingencies. These same tests are tools to measure individual proficiency and to evaluate prison-training programs. This testing includes the entire security staff from the newest recruit to the warden.

Exit briefings include meritorious promotions, awards for outstanding service as well as relief from duty for incompetence and formulation of charge sheets for legal action. All of which is open to public attendance and scrutiny.

Like the prison accreditation commission, our elected representatives have failed to act on the information available to them in their oversight roles. Unannounced and autonomous inspections are an approach with wide applications. The death of Martin Lee Anderson, the 14-year-old youthful offender at the Bay County Boot Camp, is a case in point. All the signs of a looming disaster were in the records and a vigilant inspector could have keyed on the problem.

We know what happens to inmates who kill correction officers; will anyone speak to what happens to correction officers who kill inmates? We need an answer to this question. We owe it to those we have chosen to lock up, because we assume responsibility for their protection. Moreover, we owe it to the thousands of dedicated and clean correction officers sidelined by nepotism and cronyism as circles of abuse and corruption went unpunished.

This corruption has been supported by the political and personal relationships woven among and between the prison industrial complex, legislature and executive branches of government. These relationships are fueled by improper contracts and political contributions, which destroy the checks and balances of government.