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## Needless Loss of Life

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Responsibility for the deaths of Jessica Lunsford and Sarah Lunde does not only lie at the hands of the psychotic men who killed them, but also squarely at the feet of the government that failed them. In particular, the legislature has abandoned its institutional duties to a democracy and in its place has emerged an incestuous relationship with the prison industrial complex.

In 2005, the state lost count and control of 1,800 sex offenders and the consequence was the deaths of Jessica Lunsford and Sarah Lunde. In theory, the problem of tracking sexual predators has been solved with a state-of-the art monitoring system. However, there are two questions that were never addressed. The first is how 1,800 sex offenders escaped supervision? Second, why was the public not alerted?

The legislature is failing again in its oversight responsibilities by not looking at the working conditions within the Department of Corrections (DOC). This is a critical issue because we are asking people to do potentially dangerous work in a less than desirable environment.

A clue to this environment is emerging in five court cases that are threading their way through the judicial system. The first is the most instructive because it opens a window upon DOC that speaks to systemic problems and not isolated or random events.

This case involves correction officers selling steroids to correction officers. Even though all parties involved in the sale and distribution of steroids pleaded guilty, the most significant question remains unanswered. Why was a drug ring operating within DOC not discovered by DOC? This case has led to several other investigations that are still unfolding.

The most telling incident uncovered to date was at a party hosted by the Florida Council on Crime and Delinquency. Newspaper reports are that a warden of wardens, a colonel and a major ganged up on a correctional officer's husband and gave him a beating that included hitting him the face and kicking him in the ribs while he was down. This raises the question of what happens to junior correction officers and inmates behind closed gates.

A clue lies in the next and potentially most explosive case. It involves a civil court trial regarding the murder of Frankie Valdez, who was locked in a single cell at the time of his death. Most disturbing is the question of why the state failed to obtain a single conviction. Second and even more disturbing is why it takes the father of the victim to go after the perpetrators for justice after the state threw in the towel.

Then there are two court cases of sexual harassment that address another area of employee discontent and endangerment. The most important point, as reported by the Gainesville Sun, are 543 sexual harassment complaints filed by female DOC employees.

Even more serious is the suicide of Captain Keith Davison on October 4, 2005. He was a "person of interest" in the rape of a co-worker after a party at the visitor's suite at Florida State Prison's

bachelor officer quarters. A second rape following the same party is reported to be under investigation by the Union County Sheriff. Then in November a DOC female correction officer was gang-raped by five prison administrators in a Lake Butler cemetery.

It could be argued that these court cases reflect a working environment that has led correction officers to vote with their feet. In a three year period ending in 2002, the number of correctional officers fell by 1,292 correction officers while the number of inmates increased by 2,320.

Compounding this exodus from DOC is an inability to retain new hires. In the same period, they were losing new correction officers at the rate of 32% by the end of their first year, 45% after the second year, and 51% after the third year.

The legislature did increase correctional officer salaries 4.5% in 2001, 2.5% in 2002, 2% in 2003, and 5% in 2004. However, the argument could be made that the pattern of pay raises center more around payoffs for political support in key election years than a concern for employee retention. This argument is reinforced by the fact that only one incumbent failed to be re-elected in the 2004 elections.

The DOC alone represents a major force of over 25,350 employees in the prison-industrial complex. We are talking of a force that has translated into votes and financial support for elected officials. Elected officials in turn appear reluctant to hold such a force accountable. Missing is the professional relationship of checks and balances as well as legislative oversight on which a democracy is dependent.

The ones that have paid for this breach of ethics and oversight responsibility are children like Jessica Lunsford and Sarah Lunde. How many more will have to die before checks and balances become the mainstay of government operations?