

Dauphin prison to add cameras

Complaints of abuse
at county facility grow

BY GARRY LENTON

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Amid rising allegations that Dauphin County Prison inmates are being abused by corrections officers, District Attorney Edward M. Marsico is calling for an increase in the use of video cameras inside the jail.

"I'd have video coverage everywhere," Marsico told members of the county prison board yesterday.

The cameras would discourage abuse, if it's happening, and provide evidence to county investigators, he said.

The county commissioners plan to add another 96 cameras to the 104 cameras in place, Commissioner Jeff Haste said.

Marsico's recommendations come amid a rising tide of complaints from inmates and their relatives who claim that a handful of corrections officers are using excessive force on prisoners.

Marsico announced yesterday that his office received three complaints of abuse since Tuesday, bringing to 11 the total for this year. There were five cases in 2006.

Four of the 11 cases have been resolved, some with the help of prison video, Marsico said. One inmate was charged with filing a false report, the other three cases were dropped for lack of evidence, he said.

Marsico also recommended that some corrections officers be issued lightweight video cameras to carry on duty and more training on how to resolve conflicts without violence.

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Marsico also called on prison officials to photograph inmates who receive medical treatment at the jail.

The recommendation was supported by Haste, who chairs the prison board.

"The more we can document with photographs the better off we all are," he said.

Prison advocates, attorneys, investigators and clergy who frequent the prison all complain that the allegations are difficult to prove because inmates and corrections officers fear retaliation if they testify.

One former prison guard told The Patriot-News that officers worry about losing their jobs. He also said abuses do happen and that the night shift was "famous for it."

Two former prison employees, Lt. Constance Bower and former Deputy Warden James DeWees, filed suits against the prison alleging that they lost their jobs for refusing to keep silent about abuses at the jail.

Bower's case was settled out of court last week days before it was to go to trial. DeWees's case has yet to go to trial.

Earlier this month, The Sunday Patriot-News profiled seven allegations of abuse, some dating to 2004. The story noted that none of the 20 cases investigated by Marsico's office between 2004 and the end of 2006 was reported to the state by the prison.

Dauphin County was not alone, however. No county prison in Pennsylvania reported an allegation of abuse of an inmate by a prison guard during the same peri-



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od, according to state records.

More than 60 people, many of them alleged victims or family members of prisoners, jammed yesterday's prison board's meeting to call on the panel to probe the allegations more aggressively.

"Something is wrong and you all know that," said Joe Cook, who alleges that his son was mistreated at the jail. "None of you have kids in here. You could care less."

"There is a systemic problem here and you all know it," said Phyllis Bennett, whose son, Charles, claims he was assaulted at the jail by a guard in November. Her son's case is under investigation. "There are good people who work in this facility, but there are people who need to be weeded out."

Marsico agreed, noting that his inability to find evidence for a criminal charge was not an indication that nothing happened.

"I want to get to the bottom of it," he said. "There is too much smoke for there not to be a fire."

Commissioners Nick DiFrancesco and George Hartwick III joined Marsico in his call for more video surveillance at the jail.

"The only areas not under surveillance are the ones we don't have the right to show," DiFrancesco said. "Other than that, there shouldn't be one square inch of this facility that isn't being videotaped."

Andy Hoover, of the American Civil Liberties Union, asked the prison board to cooperate with a newly formed coalition that wants to help identify and correct problems at the prison.

The County Prison Watch, which includes representatives from Firm Foundation, the Lewisburg Prison Project and the Pennsylvania Prison Society, said the prison board needed to make system-wide reforms at the jail.

"We have great concern that there is a systemic pattern of excessive use of force against prisoners at Dauphin County Prison and a culture which, despite the best intentions of the prison board, is designed to enable such behavior rather than correct it," Hoover said.

Warden Dominick DeRose, who also has expressed concern about the allegations, said the prison is willing to work with community members to answer questions about its policies.