



Warden welcomes investigation of Northumberland County Prison

BY ERIC SCICCHITANO (STAFF WRITER ERIC_S@NEWSITEM.COM)

Published: July 18, 2014

ARTICLE TOOLS

FONT SIZE: [A] [A] [A]
OUR SOCIAL NETWORKS  
FACEBOOK
SIGN UP NEWSLETTER

SUNBURY - The county's prison warden is demanding an investigation of the jail and his management of it.

Warden Roy Johnson has been targeted by majority commissioners Stephen Bridy and Vinny Clausi, who have criticized him in the wake of two inmate suicides in the past 10 months along with allegations of delayed parole paperwork, allegedly costing an estimated \$9,000 in June and \$100,000 in 2013.

"The bottom line is, yes, I demand that every allegation be investigated," Johnson said Thursday. "If it's true, I'll take my lumps."

He continued, "I am willing to open this facility to any reputable inspection agency. The Attorney General, the FBI, the DOC. I will put my record and my credibility against anybody's."

Clausi said he's uninterested in Johnson's challenge. He said the evidence exists in the parole paperwork alone.

"I recommend the warden resign because his days are numbered," Clausi said.

There were 21 inmates placed on suicide watch in June, two more than the 19 combined in April and May. A representative for Prime Care Medical Inc., the prison's health care provider, said it doesn't mean there were 21 attempts. Rather, the figure is a result of inmate screening during the intake process.

Religious policy

Apart from criticisms by Bridy and Clausi, Johnson was also criticized Wednesday by a former imam of the State Correctional Institution-Coal Township, Mustafa Abuomar.

Abuomar, who has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against his former employer, accuses the county prison of failing its Muslim inmates by incorrectly serving food during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which ends July 28. Meals had not been served in accordance with religious tenets for fasting from dawn to sunset, he said.

Abuomar said he was initially convinced by prison officials they knew how to handle the month-long observance. When that proved incorrect, he sought to speak with Johnson, but said the warden never returned his calls. He said his private attorneys then contacted the prison to discuss the issue.

"I challenge him to show what is the religious policy," Abuomar said Thursday. "What is the plan of action to accommodate inmates? If you have a policy, you must have a procedure on how to take action."

Johnson said he wasn't sure if religious policy specific to Northumberland County Prison is in place, but that standard policy of state and federal penal institutions are followed if specific policies aren't in place on the county level.

A recent inspection by the state Department of Corrections included the review of prison policies. There was no mention of a lack of or incorrect application of religious policy, according to county Commissioner Rick Shoch.

Johnson said Thursday the prison has averaged lately between three and five Muslim inmates. None locked up during Ramadan filled a formal complaint with prison staff about observance of the holiday. Abuomar lodged the complaints, and Johnson said they've since been addressed.

"We weren't getting the meals there early enough. We corrected that issue. If the inmates would have told us the first day, we would have fixed it," Johnson said.

Abuomar also continued his accusation that Johnson was fired from his job at the state prison in Coal Township, which Johnson has fiercely denied. Shoch said Wednesday Abuomar failed to provide any information backing his claim. Abuomar said he wasn't there to levy that accusation, and that it came in response to jabs at his character taken by Johnson. If Shoch or any other county official wants to find out who's being honest, he said they need only follow the paper trail.

Shoch said Thursday the county isn't privy to private information, like Johnson's medical records. Abuomar said Johnson simply needs to sign a waiver for such protected records.

But Shoch said looking into alleged past discrepancies irrelevant to Johnson's current job performance is a waste of time.

"The relevant issue is what his performance has been," Shoch said.

He said Johnson has drastically improved the professionalism of prison staff and improved how prisoners are treated.

Seen improvement

Dave Sprout, a paralegal with the Lewisburg Prison Project, a prisoner advocacy group, agreed Johnson has boosted the performance of prison staff. He noted the increase in medical care, in part due to a lawsuit filed by the advocacy group, and the installation of interior surveillance cameras.

"I believe they try to do their job the best they can, and it's a difficult job. I think (Johnson) brought a little more professionalism to the staff," Sprout said Thursday.

Many of the prison's problems, including potential mental health issues with inmates or staff, is largely due to the prison building itself, Sprout said. He said that's the biggest challenge facing prison and county officials, and he hopes more attention will be paid to improvements.

Suicides can occur in new prisons, too, Sprout acknowledged, but he said the atmosphere of a facility built in 1876 can compound issues with depression.

Sprout said the Lewisburg Prison Project has not been contacted by any county inmates about delayed processing of parole applications.

Johnson remained steadfast in defense of his reputation. To his critics, he said, "If you're going to make accusations, be prepared to defend them and be prepared to back them up."