

BOP EMPLOYEES



Correctional Officers Call for Safe Prisons

Prison violence on the rise as inmates outnumber officers



AFGE's Council of Prison Locals President Bryan Lowry (left) and CPL legislative coordinator Phil Glover testified during a House Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, and Science hearing to address the critical situation facing BOP.

Correctional Officer Jose Rivera was stabbed to death in a federal prison in Atwater, California, while locking inmates into their cells by himself in June last year. Almost a year later, correctional officers are still unarmed and the Bureau of Prisons still assigns only one officer to each housing unit at its high security penitentiaries. More recently on April 23, an officer at a prison in Terre Haute, Indiana, was stabbed seven times by an inmate in a murder attempt. A week later at a prison in Tucson, Arizona, an officer was attacked and could not radio for help because his radio had been grabbed and thrown from his duty belt. Responding officers came only after another inmate alerted them.

The dangerous prison conditions got BOP officers to wonder why they are still left short-staffed when the agency has been given a budget increase every year.

“This agency's priorities are misplaced,” said Phil Glover, a correctional officer in Pennsylvania and AFGE's Council of Prison Locals' legislative coordinator. “We are not getting the support we need to do our job.”

Theirs is a job like no other. The officers' “offices” are inhabited by dangerous criminals who tend to break rules and laws. They are regularly outnumbered by 100 or 200 to one on evening and morning shifts, but they are equipped with only a radio and handcuffs. They get spit on, have urine and feces thrown at them, or worse, are kicked, punched, and stabbed with homemade weapons. Crimes are committed almost daily but they are handled internally and the public never knows about them. The officers are also forced to supervise anywhere between one to three housing units with up to 400 inmates by themselves. This means that if they're working in one of those housing units, the other two have no security. BOP, meanwhile, is turning a deaf ear to the officers' request for more staff and certain protections such as pepper spray and batons.

“This is unacceptable,” said Bryan Lowry, president of the council which represents 34,000 BOP correctional officers and staff across the country. “We are furious that BOP is ignoring the staffing problem and putting these officers and our communities at risk.”

AFGE has been pushing hard for changes. AFGE President John Gage met with new Attorney General Eric Holder in April to discuss these concerns. A month earlier, Lowry and Glover testified before Congress detailing how unsafe federal prisons have become. AFGE also criticized BOP, which was given a budget increase of \$545 million this fiscal year but refused to use it to hire more officers. The union is calling on Congress to provide a \$500 million increase to BOP next year and direct the agency to use a big chunk of the money to hire 3,316 new correctional officers.

“How much longer will it be until one of us is killed again?” Lowry asks. “BOP has to act and act fast before the tragedy like the one at Atwater strikes again.”

AFGE is asking BOP officers to contact their Council of Prison Local to find out what they can do about the understaffing problem at their facility.



