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Texas Senate Calls Hearings Over Prison Corruption

By Stephen Dean and Brian Sasser

Texas prison leaders have been called to testify at state Senate hearings in response to Local 2 Investigates' reporting on corruption behind bars.

"We've got some systemic problems and this might be the tip of the iceberg," said Sen. John Whitmire (D-Houston), chair of the powerful Senate Criminal Justice Committee.

He called for the hearings in response to a series of reports by Local 2 Investigates, outlining a pattern of corruption allegations being met with questionable handling by prison leaders at the Terrell prison unit near Rosharon in Brazoria County.

Correction officers provided documents to Local 2 Investigates, spelling out how they provided first-hand accounts and other evidence of wrongdoing among prison staff. Yet, they say the allegations were not addressed and the whistleblowers themselves faced retaliation as the corruption was allowed to continue.

The documents showed they reported sex being coordinated and arranged between guards and convicts, prison staff looking the other way as banned items were funneled into the lockup and staff taking cash in some cases to allow all sorts of wrongdoing.

Whitmire said he is concerned that the same sort of corruption and covering up could be in place at other prisons throughout the state, based on what he saw in the Local 2 Investigates reports.

"It concerns me," said Whitmire. "I would suggest it probably took your involvement to really make the difference," he said in reference to the Local 2 Investigates reports over the past month.

The corrections officers who blew the whistle said most of their fellow officers were involved in the crimes or the cover-ups. They described the staff as "rogue officers" who swept the wrongdoing under the rug and kept the organized crime intact.

"There's no doubt the warden and other internal people were involved in the misconduct," said Whitmire.

While the whistleblowers said their evidence was ignored for months, only after the Local 2 Investigates reporting was the senior warden removed and a new management staff put in place below him. The Terrell prison was also placed on lockdown a few days after the story was broadcast, as senior prison leaders searched all inmates, employees and employees' cars for evidence.

"If you have complaints by guards or employees and they fall on deaf ears, we've got a real security breach," said Whitmire.

The Criminal Justice Committee hearings are scheduled for June 4 in Austin.

In an e-mail to Local 2 Investigates, Texas Department of Criminal Justice spokeswoman Michelle Lyons wrote, "We look forward to working closely with legislators to continue to address such topics as the agency's correctional officer shortage."

She and other prison system officials have tied some of the issues of corruption to the lack of manpower.

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Lyons continued, "Related specifically to the Terrell Unit, the agency has taken seriously allegations of retaliation, discrimination and criminal wrongdoing at the facility."

"In addition to restructuring the unit's administration, TDCJ has referred allegations of criminal behavior to the Office of Inspector General, the independent internal affairs division which investigates allegations of criminal activity and serious policy violations within the prison system," Lyons wrote.

She concluded with, "We will work closely with the state's leadership to address any concerns related to security at Terrell or other units."

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