

Beverly Eaves Perdue
Governor



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Secretary

North Carolina Department of Correction

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Statement from Secretary Alvin Keller regarding Central Prison mental health report

As the Secretary of Correction I want to state firmly and clearly our agency's long-standing commitment to providing a community standard of health care to all prison inmates. It's important to emphasize that a detailed review recently published, and mentioned in news reports, was requested by Division of Prisons management to address any deficiencies in the Central Prison Mental Health unit operations. The in-depth assessment was reviewed by management once it was completed in May 2011, and it generated great concern.

Within one business day, the newly named Deputy Director of Health Services assembled a multi-disciplinary subject matter expert team that reviewed the report line by line. Assignments for immediate actions were made to take care of sanitation, cleanliness, supervisory roles, staffing, records management and other areas. The facility is clean and appropriately staffed. A broader, detailed corrective action plan was developed assigning specific responsibilities for completing action steps for each area.

The day after the report was provided to my office, a member of my executive team addressed the serious nature of the Central Prison operational issues and management deficiencies reflected in this report with the warden. Following that meeting, the warden made it known that he had prepared his retirement paperwork and would be submitting it immediately. The process for selecting a new warden culminated this week in the naming of veteran prison administrator Kenneth Lassiter to the top position at Central Prison.

In the last several months, Deputy Secretary James French has met frequently with key managers and has required frequent updates on Central Prison and its medical and mental health facilities in areas such as vacancies, training protocols, standard operating procedures, equipment along with other related issues impacting the mission of the new operation. An entirely new management team that includes a new chief executive officer of the health complex, a new nursing director and others at Central Prison have been addressing corrective actions in those facilities and will continue to do so along with the new warden.

I would like to clarify some mischaracterizations and exaggerations of the report presented in the media.

The intent in mentioning the inmate deaths in the report was to make a point that the inpatients in a mental health setting routinely have a medical issue, and a sick call request is not necessary. It was in no way intended to attribute the deaths to "negligence."

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Several news reports have described an “infestation of roaches” and cells soaked with urine and feces. However, there is no infestation. In fact, the reviewer noted in the report that there were “no insects observed.” It was also noted that a staff member stated that “the facility has roaches and ants at times.” An exterminator has historically treated the facility on a monthly basis and will continue to do so.

All cells were not soaked with urine. Out of six housing units, there was one unit where the smell of urine was prevalent and this is the unit that houses 24 inmates with the most severe behavioral issues. These inmates require two officers anytime they are moved out of their cells. There are times when mental health patients spread urine and feces in their cells. These instances are unfortunate and in many cases compete with other safety situations. Regardless, there are sanitation protocols that are and must be continually reinforced.

In the last few months, we have invited numerous groups to include the news media, legislators, inmate advocacy organizations to visit both the old Central Prison medical and mental health facilities, as well the new health complex, to see the operations and the conditions for themselves. Several TV news and print reporters spent three hours touring both facilities. On a separate day several legislative staff members did the same.

Finally, I will restate the department’s commitment to providing a community standard of care to all inmates in existing mental health settings, and to ensure that in the new Mental Health facility that the Division of Prisons carries forward only the best clinical and operational practices. I want to assure the public that the department will operate the new facility within the community standard of care for in-patient mental health units, as well continue its commitment to the safe management of all behaviorally difficult offenders. To date, implementing the corrective actions for the health of the inmates and the sanitation at Central Prison has been a priority, but the management review of this serious issue is ongoing and additional actions will be implemented as necessary.

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