

## Department of Corrections or Corruption?

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By Jackelyn Barnard First Coast News

JACKSONVILLE, FL -- It's called the Iron Triangle. A place where on each side of State Road 16, a handful of prisons meet.

Those who live and work in the Iron Triangle will tell you behind the razor sharp wires is a code, one few are willing to talk about openly.

"Everybody likes to use the phrase good old boys club, that's what it is out there and they protect one another. There is a code of silence," says a former correctional officer we will call Dave.

Dave is breaking the silence along with a few others who are still in the corrections system.

"If it were known who I am, at minimum my career with DOC would be over, at minimum," says a high ranking correctional officer we will call Mark.

The only way Dave and Mark would talk to us is we concealed their faces, distorted their voices and changed their names.

"I fear retaliation from the upper echelon at work," says TJ, another correctional officer who would only speak on condition of anonymity.

There is one person who is not afraid to say who he is. "I could sit here until the sun goes down next week," says Ron McAndrew.

McAndrew has been on the inside of Corrections as warden at the Florida State Prison.

"They'll find some way to get even with you and that's well known. The intimidation factor is unbelievable," says McAndrew.

With these former and current correctional workers, we've uncovered documents, pictures and other evidence that is now part of numerous state and federal investigations.

"I would equate it to the mafia, yes," says TJ.

There are steroid probes, sexual harassment lawsuits, claims of inmates being tortured.

"I would say that 10 percent of the Florida Department of Corrections is in fact the florida department of corruption," says McAndrew.

Corruption he says that runs deep before and after his time as warden.

McAndrew has been in the Corrections system more than 20 years. He was at Florida State Prison, as warden, from 1996 to 1998.

"I ran a straight shop. I had a number of people at Florida State Prison who gave me their heart, soul and certainty dedicated work, but I had a nest of rats that you wouldn't believe."

McAndrew says trouble began with the inmates.

On any given day, you'll find inmates mowing grass at homes along State Road 16. By law, inmates can do this because the homes sit on state property. Those inside the Iron Triangle say problems begin when inmates are used illegally for things that don't belong to the state. "If you were having problems with your TV, carry it out to the institution and get a convict to fix it. Inmates are not to be used, not to be used to work on personal property not for personal gain," says Mark.

The free work may not payoff. According to those we talked to, inmates are abused.

"There are cases of inmates being physically abused," says Mark.

"Goon squads fiercely beat inmates, intimidate the rest of the staff," says McAndrew.

First Coast News has obtained pictures of inmates who claim they were tortured with chemicals as a means of retaliation while at Florida State Prison.

According to the lawsuit, filed by ten different inmates, it was a practice that increased in use by 157 percent over the last six years. According to the lawsuit, the Department's Secretary, James Crosby, knew it was a problem.

The lawsuit also alleges Crosby knew correctional officers abused inmates because the former warden told him.

That warden you've already met. "In 1998, I had an officer under investigation for some serious allegations when he resigned. Two weeks later, I got news he had been re-hired by Crosby as a correctional officer purportedly to be his next star baseball player," says McAndrew.

In the last three months, we've tried to find the answers.

We've sent numerous public records requests to Corrections for answers on everything from random drug testing, employee club budget and audits to who lives in staff housing and who has state vehicles.

We've even asked for investigations that were allegedly cut short and documents that some allege were falsified in a cover-up.

In the three months of filing public records requests, Corrections was only willing to give us part of the answers.

"It doesn't surprise me at all. Even if you ask for material under the Freedom of Information Act, they'll pretend they didn't get your call, your e-mail, your letter," Says McAndrew.

We are not the only ones having trouble breaking into the Iron Triangle.

A month ago, a Federal judge sanctioned the department for not following the rules and not providing documents it was ordered to turn over in a sexual harassment lawsuit.

Two weeks ago, changes started to happen. Governor Jeb Bush fired the Department's Secretary, James Crosby, and replaced him with an Army Colonel, James McDonough.

"If there is corruption in the system, we're going to find them. We're going to expose them and we will get rid of the perpetrators and we will fix these systems, that is a promise," says McDonough.

Changes are what some say will help the embattled system, but the changes came too late for one correctional officer.

"I walked away from that place because I knew that I could not do, I could not go in there and look the other way."

Tuesday night at 11pm, First Coast News uncovers allegations of forged documents, documents so important some workers say their lives are in danger.

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