

**Angela Smith**

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**From:** <bonnie8888@aol.com>  
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**Sent:** Monday, May 10, 2010 10:22 PM  
**Subject:** [PNN] Prison officials open "full investigation" into abuse claims

## **Prison officials open "full investigation" into abuse claims**

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State prison officials said Monday that they had dramatically broadened their investigation of alleged racism and cruelty by guards at the High Desert State Prison in Susanville, California. The move came in response, officials said, to a Bee investigation published on Sunday and Monday about claims of abuse of prisoners in a special behavior modification program.

The corrections department "has zero tolerance for abusive behavior by inmates or staff," said Scott Kernan, undersecretary for operations. "The department takes allegations seriously and a full investigation is underway."

Earlier in the day, the American Friends Service Committee challenged California legislators to look into the abuse allegations - and pushed for the behavior units to be sharply restricted.

The Bee's report found support for the abuse claims in interviews with inmates, prison documents and a long-hidden report written by corrections department research experts.

For years, prison officials knew about many of the claims - including denial of medical care, racial slurs and the destruction of prisoners' formal written protests of mistreatment - yet did nothing to investigate.

After initially downplaying the allegations to The Bee, Kernan subsequently said that the department's internal affairs office would look into them, but in a limited way: reviewing actions by managers after state researchers informed them of the abuse allegations.

On Monday he said the investigation had been broadened to cover the abuse claims themselves - whether reported to state researchers or revealed by The Bee - as well as revelations in The Bee that state researchers may have been retaliated against after they pressed for an investigation of the prisoner claims.

However, "because the investigation involves staff conduct, it will not be made public based on laws that protect employee privacy," said Gordon J. Hinkle, the department's press secretary.

The Bee's sources described strip-searches in a snow-covered exercise yard, as well as guards who assaulted inmates, tried to provoke attacks between inmates, and deliberately spread human excrement on cell doors. Prisoners depicted an environment of brutality, corruption and fear.

Though the High Desert behavior unit was closed for budgetary reasons, The Bee found units at other prisons to be marked by isolation and deprivation, lacking the education that is supposed to be an underpinning of the program, and without social contact, TV or radio, or even fresh air.

On Monday, Kernan defended the behavior program as effective for "reducing violence against staff and other inmates." He added that his department "is committed to implementing the most effective programs that maintain the security of the prison system while ensuring the safety of staff and inmates." The American Friends Service Committee called for the Senate public safety committee to step in and conduct hearings into the allegations. It recommended the state restrict the use of behavior units "and other forms of long term isolation."

"What is especially frightening in this story is how long it has been going on and the extent to which the (corrections department) seems to have covered it up," said Laura Magnani, an official of the nonprofit Quaker organization. "I'm particularly worried about the prisoners who are speaking out."

Magnani said that during a visit to High Desert in 2007, she herself witnessed a prisoner being paraded, shoeless and dressed only in underwear, across the prison's snow-covered yard.

The advocacy group also called for improved access by prisoners to independent auditors in order to ensure that prison staff cannot intercept formal complaints about treatment by correctional officers.

Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, chair of the public safety committee, was unavailable for comment Monday.

Call The Bee's Charles Piller, (916) 321-1113.

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