

## Florida Prison Guards Get New Policy On Violent Acts

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*Democrat Political Editor via Knight Ridder*

Hoping to change a two-fisted culture in the ranks of prison guards, the head of Florida's prison system Thursday ordered a new policy of automatic suspension of any employees charged with a violent attack - on or off the job.

Department of Corrections Secretary James V. Crosby also said he will start random drug-testing of employees. Previously, tests were rare and were only done "for cause," he said.

In a conference call with Capitol reporters, Crosby said he has formed an 11-member "incident review team" to recommend reforms in the prison system, which has been rocked by a state and federal investigation that has reached into the highest executive echelons of his department. Although Crosby has not been accused of any offense, investigators have taken a leaf blower, a firewood rack and a ladder from his home during a probe of alleged misuse of prison property and inmate labor.

Crosby said his task force would make recommendations by early next year on ethics matters. His immediate concern, in announcing the new policy, was a barroom brawl near Starke last weekend that left four correctional officers facing misdemeanor charges.

The former Panhandle regional director and two high-ranking commanders were charged by Tallahassee police last week with felony battery in the beating of a man during a Department of Corrections party at the local armory last April. And a former library employee at Apalachee Correctional Institution near Sneads was earlier charged with theft when state investigators said he was given a no-show job in order to play softball on the prison team in Crosby's department tournament in Jacksonville.

Crosby, a 33-year veteran of the department, said the DOC is a "great" agency. But he said an atmosphere has evolved that sometimes winks at rules. He said the number of misconduct reports is neither higher nor lower than it has usually been in a department with 27,000 employees, but that recent controversies have focused more attention on DOC.

"We've had fights with employees before," said Crosby. "But I think, obviously, sometimes you get involved in a way of life and an acceptance and our tolerance level may have been set way too low over the years."

Eleven employees have been arrested on a wide range of charges in recent months. The FBI and Florida Department of Law Enforcement have investigated a steroid-distribution ring, in which five guards have pleaded guilty in federal court, as well as allegations of embezzlement of funds from a metal-recycling fund, use of inmate labor for personal chores and pilferage of prison tools.

During a banquet and party at the Tallahassee armory in April, the husband of an employee slipped and fell against another woman - sparking a slugfest that left him bruised and bleeding. Tallahassee police last week charged former regional director Allen Clark, Col. Richard Allen Frye and Maj. James Anthony Bowen with punching and kicking him.

Early Saturday, four correctional officers and an ex-inmate were arrested in a brawl at a bar popular with prison employees near Starke. Crosby said he spoke with all wardens and top brass of the DOC early Thursday before issuing his latest memo.

"Also, effective immediately, any staff member who is arrested for an act of aggression, on or off duty, will be automatically placed on administrative leave pending a review of the incident to determine the

facts leading to the arrest and to determine whether the employee should remain away from the workplace pending further investigation or resolution of the criminal charges," Crosby said in his memo.

In creating the incident review team, he called for a review of "current internal procedures regarding responding to critical incidents" and "disciplinary procedures for staff misconduct." The team will also be "reviewing data on staff drug and alcohol use."

Crosby said employees who are arrested will be put on paid administrative leave initially.

Al Shopp, director of the Florida Police Benevolent Association, said the union representing prison employees had discussed the new policy with Crosby.

"We're all for it," he said of the drug-testing plan.

As for automatic suspension of employees accused of "aggressive" acts, Shopp said PBA did not object "as long as it's paid administrative leave."

Shopp said he did not think there is anything wrong with the atmosphere or corporate culture of the department.

"It's a stressful job," he said. "There's not a problem that I can see. I haven't seen any great rise in incidents."



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