



November 6, 2009

Prison worker: Riot started over food quality

By Stephenie Steitzer
ssteitzer@courier-journal.com

FRANKFORT, Ky. — A Northpoint Training Center corrections officer testified Friday that inmates rioted at the prison in August because they weren't being fed enough and the food they did receive was of poor quality.

Matt Hughes, who has worked at the prison south of Lexington for the past year, told a legislative panel that the Department of Corrections' assertion that inmates rioted because they had been put on lockdown after a gang incident was "bogus."

"It was the food," he said. "The food was slop."

Six buildings, including the kitchen, were burned and eight inmates and eight corrections officers suffered minor injuries after prisoners began setting fires and trashing buildings at the facility near Burgin on Aug. 21.

The department has said it is satisfied with the quality of food provided to inmates by Aramark Services, a private food service company in Pennsylvania.

It has declined to comment on reports that the riot was sparked by inmates' dissatisfaction with the food, citing its continuing investigation.

Department officials couldn't be reached for comment.

"What you are hearing is anecdotal," Aramark spokeswoman Kristine Grow said after the meeting. "There has been no official finding as to the cause of the riot. Aramark stands by the quality of its service and its food."

The department has said it plans to release its investigative report on the riot this month.

Rep. Brent Yonts, D-Greenville, has prefiled a bill that would cancel the state's \$12 million contract with Aramark and prohibit the privatization of inmate food service in Kentucky's state-operated prisons.

The department says it saves \$5 million a year by using Aramark. The state pays Aramark \$2.63 for each inmate served each day.

Hughes said he and other corrections officers believe inmates throughout the state's prison system had begun plotting a riot in the weeks before the Northpoint disturbance.

Because Northpoint inmates are held in dorms instead of cells, they have more freedom to move around. That, along with more inexperienced corrections officers, is why inmates chose to stage the riot at Northpoint, Hughes said.

"The safety and security risk at that institution was really bad," he said.

Hughes said he and other corrections officers are worried about their safety when inmates are hungry. The problem has led to more gambling and bartering among inmates for canteen items, which leads to debts and then fights.

Hughes was among about 25 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees who appeared at Friday's hearing.

AFSCME officials are pushing the state to improve safety measures for corrections officers.

Hughes and Yonts testified that food portions are often small and that about 20 percent of the inmates can't afford to buy food from the inmate canteen to supplement what they get in the cafeteria.

Yonts passed out a photograph of a breakfast tray at the Western Kentucky Correctional Complex that contained just two small biscuits and a helping of grits.

He said he receives seven to 10 letters a day from inmates and corrections officers across the state complaining about the prisons' food quality.

He described how oatmeal, gravy and orange juice are often watered down to serve more inmates; butter is added to food to meet the required caloric content; and chicken is soaked in vinegar to make it look fresh. He said mice droppings, roaches, ants and other bugs have been found in meals.

"I've heard about all I want to hear," said Sen. Carroll Gibson, R-Leitchfield.

Gibson asked that a special meeting of the committee be held next week to hear from corrections officials, who were not at Friday's hearing.

Rep. Darryl Owens, D-Louisville, also asked that the committee further investigate the alleged problems.

"I'm sort of stunned by this testimony today, and I think it requires us to do something," he said.

Reporter Stephenie Steitzer can be reached at (502) 875-5136.
