

Three disciplined in suicide of 18-year-old at youth prison

By Don Thompson, Associated Press, *Mercury News*, July 21, 2006

SACRAMENTO - Three employees at a youth prison in Stockton were disciplined after the suicide last year of an 18-year-old ward who was isolated in his room for two months, the corrections department said Friday in a preliminary response to a public records request from The Associated Press.

In a report that was previously released, the prison system's inspector general blamed poor oversight for Joseph Daniel Maldonado's Aug. 31 suicide at the N.A. Chaderjian Youth Correctional Facility.

Employees failed to allow Maldonado counseling, visitors or exercise and missed several signs that he needed mental health treatment, said the December report by Inspector General Matthew Cate. After employees discovered Maldonado had covered his windows and was not responding, they took 38 minutes to enter the teen's room.

They found Maldonado hanging from a bed sheet.

Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation spokesman Julio Calderon on Friday said three employees were disciplined in the Maldonado case, but he could not disclose what the actions were because it is a personnel matter.

The number of disciplinary actions was released after more than seven months of requests for information and a Public Records Act request the AP filed June 9.

The department still has not formally responded to the request because it has yet to file what's known as a "corrective action plan," nearly 11 months after Maldonado's death, Calderon said. The plan should be done "anytime

soon," he said, and will be made public then - without the details of employee discipline.

Maldonado's family also hasn't been told what punishment the employees faced, but hopes to learn more through a lawsuit filed in January, said Ben Wyskida of the Oakland-based prison reform group Books Not Bars. Maldonado was serving a sentence for stealing a car in Sacramento County.

"It could be anything from a slap on the wrist to a firing," Wyskida said. "It's our belief that the department was really negligent on this thing. ... If the governor was really committed to reform, this was an investigation that would have taken place in public. Without a lawsuit, we may never find out what happened."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has acknowledged that California's prison system has reached a crisis state, and he called a special Legislative session to address the issue beginning Aug. 7. Acting Corrections Secretary James Tilton said the overcrowded facilities could run out of beds by next year and the federal courts have taken over management of inmate health care.

Critics, including Books Not Bars, have called for closing youth prisons like Chaderjian. Instead, the department last week said it will turn Chaderjian into a specialized treatment facility for sexual offenders and those with substance abuse or mental health problems.

Bernard Warner, chief of juvenile justice, said last week that since Maldonado's death the department has reduced the number of wards at Chaderjian's living units, where a security camera captured video of two wards being beaten by six correctional employees in 2004.

Warner said having fewer wards and more employees has helped reduce youth violence there. The changes were announced as part of a court settlement filed last week in Alameda County Superior Court that calls for changes throughout the juvenile justice system.

The suicides of two wards at a different facility in January 2004 helped trigger investigations into the way California treats its young offenders.

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