

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

April 30, 2012

Recent Assaults on Prison Staff

There have been 2 assaults on staff at Stanley in a 2-week period - the first such incidents that I am aware of since I arrived here over a year ago.

Each situation, no doubt, had its own special circumstances which resulted in the attack on staff and I do not believe violence is ever justified in a Wisconsin prison. However, there are a couple of observations I'd like to make on what creates conditions that sometimes result in assaults on staff.

There are two factors I believe are necessary before an assault on staff will occur. First, it is almost always a mentally unstable prisoner who attacks staff. Many prisoners are mentally ill, often undiagnosed, and fairly easy to spot based on the way they interact with their environment and with others. These guys need to be identified and treated, perhaps all sent to one prison where specially-trained staff can manage them more effectively and humanely.

Second, some action of a staff member usually precedes an assault. The prisoner, for reasons he feels justify his actions, lashes out at the staff member. It could be the result of frustration or poor impulse control but I have never seen or heard of an assault on a staff member which was not preceded by some action or comment of the staff member directed toward the prisoner.

I have witnessed many staff members antagonize prisoners for no apparent reason but most often the prisoner just accepts the mistreatment as part of doing time and does not react. As I said, the prisoners who assault staff are mentally unbalanced the the provocation which a normal person would ignore or disregard triggers the outburst.

Keeping these mentally ill prisoners in general population makes it hard on everyone. They need to be separated, perhaps medicated, and given appropriate treatment. But many prisoners fear the stigma of being labeled mentally ill and would oppose being labeled as such.

It is also no secret to the administration that certain staff members cause problems by the way in which they interact with prisoners. What I don't understand is why they don't re-train them and if that fails, fire them. Staff members whose people skills or bias against prisoners is so bad that it affects work performance, endanger us all. I will note, however, that there are many wonderful staff members who treat prisoners humanely and who are liked and respected by the prisoners. Yet those same above-average staff members are not given any recognition by the administration for their superior skill in handling prisoners.

This place could be run so much better if the criminal justice "experts" in charge were replaced by psychologists and social workers who were not indoctrinated into the current group-think on how prisoners should be treated.

As the Wisconsin Supreme Court said in State ex rel Anderson-el v Cooke (2000 WI 40), 234 Wis. 2d 626, 610 N.W. 2d 821, 827:

"Finally, we note that our decision today serves an important public policy purpose: it is meant to further both inmates' and the Department's respect for the penal system. If inmates see that their guards, wardens, and administrators abide by the rules then the inmates will be more likely to respect both the rules and the people who enforce them. Moreover, a system that operates according to the rules is more efficient than one where the rules are followed only sporadically. It would be hypocritical for the prison system to force inmates to 'obey the rules' when the officers in charge do not."

Respect the prisoners and they will respect you.