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Sen. Cloud expresses serious concerns for the state of OJJ

March 11, 2022 - State Senator Heather Cloud, R-Ville Platte, during Monday's Finance committee meeting, addressed representatives from the Office of Juvenile Justice (OJJ) on serious concerns throughout state facilities, especially regarding inmate on guard violence and the number of inmate escapes over the last several years.

Deputy Secretary of OJJ, Bill Sommers, pointed to critical staff shortages, especially among front line staff, as one of the reasons there have been so many incidents in facilities. Without proper back-fill staffing, and such high rate of incidents, "OJJ is in crisis mode daily." He explained that while they are facing an unprecedented staffing issue, they have attempted to step up security measures in other areas, with surveillance video and wire fences.

Senator Cloud, vice chair of the Finance committee, spoke directly to Secretary Sommers highlighting important areas of concern. To begin, OJJ saw 7 escapes during 2021, compared to DOC who only saw 1. She told of one inmate who managed to escape multiple times from multiple facilities. This inmate was moved to several facilities throughout the state, but without proper consequences, escaped multiple times. She also told of an incident within a facility where an inmate attacked a male guard, causing serious injury. The inmate was allowed to stay in the facility, and 4 months later, attacked another guard, this time a female guard, causing near death injuries. With 60% of the OJJ guard population women, this is a serious cause for concern, and likely contributing to the staffing

shortage. Another story told of an offender who was captured after an escape and moved to a different facility. Five days later this inmate was found with a gun. The inmate was able to possess a firearm for 5 days within the facility.

Sen. Cloud said, “We throw money at these problems year after year for recruitment and to improve security measures, but we are simply throwing money at the symptoms when we need to be addressing the fractures to the foundation of OJJ.”

In her conversation with Secretary Sommers, Sen. Cloud pointed out that these facilities house inmates in dormitories where the worst offenders could be sleeping near those with minimal offenses. There could be someone detained for murder housed with someone detained for a simple shop lifting crime. She recommended using a tiered system to help classify inmates, to offer protection for lower level offenders and higher security measures for riskier inmates. Sen. Cloud said, “It is time to stop throwing money around and take action. If we return year after year, and have the same conversation, we are continuing to put people at risk. If someone dies and we did not act when we knew what was going on, that leaves blood on our hands. Instead, I choose to take action now.”

Sen. Cloud requested that Secretary Sommers return with the parameters of a plan to fix the problems of violence on guards in these facilities to help with staffing issues and increase security, and to create a tiered system for inmates. This plan will need to be presented to the Finance committee before the final budget is decided upon.

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