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Audit: State prisons mishandled sexual abuse claims, must improve oversight on many fronts

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Eight state prison inmates killed by drug overdoses, homicides and suicide were logged as natural deaths by the Tennessee Department of Correction, according to a highly critical audit that identified more than a dozen policy breeches at the agency.

The audit, overseen by the state comptroller, also found Tennessee prisons have improperly investigated allegations of sexual abuse and have failed to meet required staffing levels. The department also faced criticism approach to health care, employee overtime and the tracking offenders who have been released on parole or probation.

Auditors called for sweeping changes to policy and protocol at the Department of Correction.

“I encourage TDOC management to review each of these findings and develop plans to correct them,” Comptroller Justin P. Wilson said in a statement. “It’s likely this will include revising current policies, training and re-training staff, and performing additional monitoring to ensure laws and policies are being followed.”

The audit found problems were widespread at state-run prisons and prisons run by Core Civic through a state contract.

The Department of Correction did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A spokesperson for Core Civic said the company was “committed to providing a high standard of care for every person in our Tennessee facilities.”

She said the company had boosted pay and recruitment efforts to improve staffing at the company's Trousdale prison, and also said the company makes extensive efforts to prevent and address sexual assault.

At the state's 14 correctional facilities, including those run by private companies, there were 642 allegations of sexual harassment or abuse between Oct. 1, 2017 and June 30, 2019.

Beyond the sheer numbers of allegations of sexual abuse and harassment, the audit found staff throughout the state's facilities did not adequately report to an internal system within 24 hours of receiving information, which is a violation of the Department of Correction's policy.

Looking at reporting of sexual abuse and harassment allegations, the comptroller's office performed a random sampling at six facilities, half of which are run by Core Civic.

At two of the Core Civic facilities, Trousdale Turner and Whiteville, an average of the random sampling revealed the allegations of abuse and harassment were logged 10 days late. A random sampling of the state's three facilities found at Northeast Correctional Complex, the allegations were reported an average of 15 days late.

At three other facilities, Northwest Correctional Complex, Turney Center Industrial Complex and Hardeman County Correction Facility, reporting of allegations of harassment and abuse was late by between three and five days.

In addition to delayed reporting, the audit found instances of facilities not recording allegations into an internal document. The audit noted South Central Correctional Facility did not report four allegations of sexual abuse and one allegation of sexual harassment in a roughly one-month period in summer 2019.

Further, the audit found that staff at two facilities made improper conclusions or had incomplete information about allegations of sexual harassment and abuse.

At Northeast Correctional Complex, staff occasionally failed to adequately document allegations.

At Turney Center Industrial Complex, staff misclassified some allegations as unfounded or unsubstantiated. Unfounded allegations are ones that are investigated and determined to not have occurred. Unsubstantiated allegations are ones that were investigated and which evidence was lacking to reach a conclusion.

Overall, the audit found that only just 58 allegations of sexual abuse and harassment at the state's 14 facilities were substantiated. Another 243 were categorized as unsubstantiated and 309 were unfounded. The investigation of 30 other allegations remains ongoing.

The total includes reports of inmate on inmate allegations, as well as those involving staff and inmates.

The total number of allegations of abuse and harassment is wide ranging at each facility. For example, Trousdale Turner Correctional Center, which is run by Core Civic, reported 50 cases of inmate on inmate sexual abuse. At Riverbend Maximum Security Institution there was just one reported case of inmate on inmate sexual abuse.

Bledsoe County Correctional Complex had the highest number of allegations of sexual harassment between inmates and staff. The facility reported 26 allegations of sexual harassment between inmates and 32 cases of harassment between staff and inmates. Overall, Bledsoe County's prison had 92 allegations of some form of harassment or abuse, the most of any prison in the state.

Answering the findings on sexual harassment and abuse in the audit, the Department of Correction acknowledged that while timely reporting did not always occur, staff and offenders remained safe.