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CRIME / LAW ENFORCEMENT

Vermont Prisons Lack Independent Abuse Reporting Hotline

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Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility

FILE: LUKE AWTRY

Signs posted throughout Vermont's prisons encourage victims of sexual misconduct, physical violence and discrimination to dial what's known as the Offender Reporting Line.

"It is never too late to report!" one sign reads.

But unlike similar hotlines at prisons throughout the U.S., Vermont's does not connect to an independent, third-party organization. Rather, callers are directed to the central office of the state Department of Corrections. From there, according to Corrections Commissioner Mike Touchette, complaints are forwarded to a prison superintendent, deputy commissioner or other department official.

That's a problem, according to Lovisa Stannow, executive director of the Los Angeles, Calif.-based prisoner advocacy group Just Detention International.

"Corrections agencies must give prisoners a way to get crisis support from an outside entity, including through a hotline," Stannow said. "It is absolutely crucial that officials clearly explain to prisoners how such services work, and who runs them. If survivors can't

trust that their attempts to get help will be confidential, many will stay quiet.”

The federal Prison Rape Elimination Act requires corrections facilities **to provide multiple avenues for inmates to report abuse**. At least one must be administered by “a public or private entity or office that is not part of the agency” and which can immediately and anonymously forward such complaints back to the agency in question.

It’s not clear that Vermont is in compliance with the law.

According to **the latest external audit of the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility**, the state’s only prison for women, inmates *do* have access to a third-party reporting entity: the Prisoners’ Rights Office, which is part of the state’s Office of the Defender General. “Prisoner’s Rights will promptly forward all information to the facility concerning a PREA complaint,” the 2017 audit reads.

But according to Emily Tredeau, supervising attorney for the Prisoners’ Rights Office, that’s not the case. “We have never had an understanding that we would forward complaints to DOC unless the inmate specifically requested and authorized us to,” she said.

The job of the Prisoners’ Rights Office is to provide legal services to Vermont inmates. Because its lawyers have an attorney-client relationship with the prisoners they serve, Tredeau said, they can’t simply forward complaints back to the state. “If they’re relying on us to tell them when a sexual assault is happening, that’s a problem,” she said.

So that leaves the in-house Offender Reporting Line.

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Tredeau doesn’t think that’s a good solution, either. “I just see it as an inherent conflict of interest,” she said. “Because what agency wants to confirm that its employees are committing crimes on the job? I think any agency would have trouble being objective in those situations.”

In an interview last month with *Seven Days*, Touchette acknowledged that the hotline should not be run by his department — in part, because it’s challenging to keep complaints confidential. “It was intended to be anonymous, but I’m not going to fool anybody,” he said. “We could probably figure out who made the call.”

According to Touchette, the department has attempted for nearly a decade to outsource the line, but to no avail.

“We have tried every year to either pay somebody or get another entity to volunteer to help us take on this hotline,” he said. “We don’t want that. We want the transparency. But nobody else wants to take on this hotline either. So we’re stuck right now.”

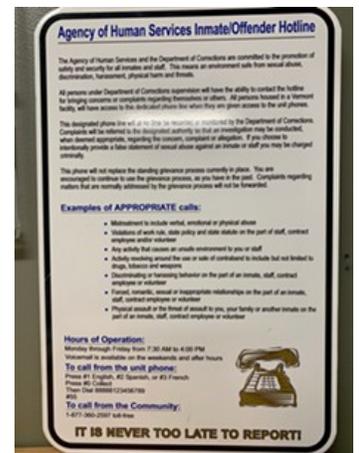
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A sign displayed at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility

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'Everybody Knew': Guards Say Higher-Ups Ignored Serious Misconduct in Vermont's Prison System

BY PAUL HEINTZ

The matter has taken on new urgency since *Seven Days* published an investigation last week documenting a pattern of sexual misconduct, drug use and retaliation at Chittenden Regional. Several inmates told the newspaper that they did not feel comfortable reporting abuse — or were skeptical that the department would take action. That prompted Touchette's boss, Human Services Secretary Mike Smith, to prioritize identifying a third-party operator.

Smith told legislators Tuesday at **a meeting of the Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee** that he was working to establish "a new reporting mechanism outside of the Department of Corrections" through which employees and inmates could lodge complaints.

On Thursday, Smith's office announced that it had set up the new employee complaint hotline. It will direct callers to the Department of Human Resources, which is not part of the Agency of Human Services. According to Candace Morgan, Smith's principal assistant, the agency is still searching for an independent entity to take on the inmate hotline.

Lovisa of Just Detention International has one idea: her own organization.

"If the Vermont DOC indeed is serious about giving prisoners safe and confidential access to a rape crisis hotline, Just Detention International can set one up," she said, noting that it already operates such a service for prisoners in Michigan. "Inmates there are receiving help from trained crisis counselors, and feel safe doing so. There's no reason JDI's hotline couldn't work in Vermont, too."

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