

July 17, 2009

Letter to the Albuquerque Journal Editor

Dear Mr. Herrera:

In a recent editorial, the Albuquerque Journal listed a series of incidents involving corrections officers at the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC). We have worked quickly to remediate these situations and remain committed to our mission, “protecting the public and providing a safe and secure environment for inmates and staff under the principles of direct supervision and in accordance with the American Correctional Association (ACA) standards.”

To say that we have not, do not, and will not make mistakes is absurd. However, we have not, do not, and will not tolerate any form of staff misconduct. In response to these charges, one corrections officer has since been terminated; one has resigned; and one has been placed on administrative leave.

MDC employs a strict hiring criteria for its officers, on par with standards used by both the Albuquerque Police Department and the Bernalillo County Sheriff’s Department. Candidates must complete a comprehensive interview and background process including a National Crime Information Center and state records check, employment verifications and provide extensive references. All candidates are reviewed by a panel of staff prior to being recommended to the Chief for selection. Fewer than 8% of those who apply are hired. Our vacancy rate is lower than 2%, a significant accomplishment considering the vacancy rate in July 2006 was over 30%.

Regarding training, cadets receive 240 hours of pre-service academy training and an additional 80 hours of field training, more than double the American Correctional Association standard of 120 hours. Staff also receives another 40 hours of in-service training annually.

There is no denying that this is a demanding and often, dangerous job. Our officers do not carry guns, although they are sometimes charged with supervising up to 96 inmates at any given time. MDC staff enforces rules through communication and officers also make written and oral reports on inmate work and behavior. They document conflicts, behavior discrepancies, hazards, and suspicious circumstances. The facility is also monitored internally by 350 strategically placed cameras that record continuously.

In addition, the Bernalillo County Commission is in the process of hiring an independent jail consultant to review and report to the Commission conditions at MDC. Since July, 2006, when the County took over the operation, there has been oversight of the facility by a former Secretary and a Deputy Secretary of Corrections for the New Mexico Department of Corrections, an American Corrections Association Auditor hired by MDC, a team of auditors from the American Corrections Association, ten attorneys and paralegals representing the plaintiffs in the McClendon law suit, a federal committee looking at sexual assaults in jails, two national expert

psychiatrists and one former medical director for prisons hired by the County to oversee the delivery of mental health and medical services.

The MDC is ranked 39th in size and considered a MEGA jail among the 3,300 jails in the United States. The population of these jails changes regularly, as new individuals are arrested and old detainees are either transferred to prison or released. On average, 40,000 inmates are processed annually through the MDC and more than 11 million people are processed through the U.S. jail system each year.

There are over 400 correctional officers and other security personnel employed at the MDC, 98% of them carry out their duties responsibly and diligently. For lower pay and less recognition than their law enforcement counterparts, our corrections officers fulfill the challenging role of security enforcement, leader, teacher, counselor and mentor to individuals incarcerated at the MDC.

We remain committed to our mission, protecting the public and providing a safe and secure environment for inmates and staff.

Sincerely,

Ron Torres, Chief of Corrections

MDC