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Youth prison officials have much to explain

THE ISSUE

Workers at the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility reported abuse of inmates and other problems to a legislative committee.

HEARINGS before a state House-Senate committee have verified <u>continuing abuse</u> at the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility, despite efforts by the Lingle administration to deal with guards' mistreatment of inmates. Blaming the problems on the bureaucratic process will not satisfy complaints in lawsuits brought against the state or bring the facility into compliance with federal standards.

Five members of the facility's staff told the joint committee last week that they believe the current administration is incapable of properly running it. Guards are confused about when to act and what level of force is appropriate in trying to subdue an inmate, according to testimony.

In some cases, guards are said to have used physical, emotional and psychological abuse of inmates. In other cases they have shied away from threatening situations, leaving some inmates or staff members at risk.

Such lingering dysfunction is astonishing in a facility that has been under investigation since 2003, when the American Civil Liberties Union reported severe conditions and treatment, and Governor Lingle replaced its top administrators. In August the U.S. Justice Department reported that the youth prison was in a "state of chaos." The ACLU represents wards in two lawsuits pending against the state.

Prior to the hearings, Sharon Agnew, executive director of the state Office of Youth Services, told the Star-Bulletin's B.J. Reyes that her office was challenged with the task of moving through a "very complex and very detailed" state system.

Only six of 22 policies on such issues as use of force and suicide prevention have been approved in the past three months by the two labor unions that represent workers. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairwoman Colleen Hanabusa, a strong labor advocate, points out that such consultation is not required by their union contracts. Administrators should be called upon to explain those problems when the committee completes its hearings this week.

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