



NEWS RELEASE

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Lucasville 25 years later: Unions call for Taskforce on prison safety

Westerville – Twenty-five years after the Lucasville prison riot, Correction Officers and other prison employees who work there wonder what lessons the state has learned, if any, about the dangerous working conditions at the facility.

Less than two months ago at that very facility, two of the most dangerous criminals in the state took an opportunity to its gory conclusion, and attempted to stab a Correction Officer to death and potentially take a nurse hostage. Correction Officer Matthew Matthias remains in stable condition at a southern Ohio hospital with 32 stab wounds and numerous internal and defensive injuries. He is currently on dialysis as his kidneys recover and will need extensive therapy for his injuries.

For many years following one of the deadliest prison riots in U.S. history, members of the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association, representing most prison staff, worked with the state to ensure Lucasville was staffed properly and overcrowding was addressed. And for a long time, it was.

But staffing since 2010 has declined, and now, new policies and procedures—including the mixing of inmate security levels and increased mental health caseloads—are putting staff and inmates in harm’s way. Today, the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association and the Service Employees International Union/1199 are calling on the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction to create a joint taskforce to investigate these matters at Lucasville and to come up with solutions by both management and union security and medical staff on how to best make employees and inmates safer.

Those who work at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility (SOCF) say the incident with Officer Matthias didn’t have to happen and that new policies not suitable for a maximum security prison have created a treacherous environment for staff. One of those changes is the mixing of inmates with different security levels and treating them as if they were in lower classifications than their officially designated one.

“We need to change the way we treat inmates on the range and in escort situations,” said Correction Sergeant Nick Brabsom, the union president at SOCF. “Level 5 inmates need to be treated at the highest security level,” he said. “And that means, two officers per inmate. Period.” Level 5 inmates are now called ERH2 or ERH3 inmates, or Extended Restrictive Housing 2 or 3 inmates.

At the Ohio State Penitentiary (OSP), another maximum security prison, not only is inmate movement restricted, high security inmates are never brought out of cells with only one Correction Officer. That didn’t happen in the case of Officer Matthias. Matthias was

transporting two Level 5 inmates to the infirmary by himself when the incident occurred. Those inmates were being housed in an area of the prison with a mix of security levels.

A new classification system that was poorly rolled out over the last year is also partly to blame, says the union, as is an increase in mental health caseloads and higher expectations for case managers.

“Lucasville has the physical ability to separate higher security level inmates from others,” said OCSEA President Chris Mabe. “And even if there is a mix of levels, the entire range should be treated as if all inmates are at the highest level,” said Mabe. Currently, there is not a system in place to readily determine each inmates’ classification on a range.

Additionally, there needs to be a balance between security issues and mental health, say representatives of SEIU/1199.

“The caseloads are not manageable and the number of inmate moves due to mental health issues is out of control,” said Josh Norris, Executive Vice President of SEIU/1199. For mental health treatment and programming, inmates are escorted to other areas of the prison, a move which is largely unnecessary. “Not only are caseloads too high, the evaluations could be done on the range at the cellblock without having to move inmates,” said Norris.

April 11, 2018 will be the 25th anniversary of the Lucasville riot. The 11-day standoff is still considered one of the deadliest prison riots in United States history with nine inmates and Correction Officer Robert Vallandingham killed.

OCSEA represents approximately 30,000 state and local government employees who work in a wide range of security, regulatory, administrative, direct care, maintenance, customer service and other positions. OCSEA represents 8,600 employees in DR&C. For more information, contact Sally Meckling, 614-865-2602 or 614-404-3881 (cell).