

February 20, 2006 State Cuts Red Tape in Prisoner Complaint Process

Media Contact:

Department of Correction

Java Ahmed

(317) 234-1693

E-mail: jahmed@doc.in.gov

"Grievance procedure helps both sides address gripes more quickly."

By Ken Kusmer

of The Associated Press

State correction officials have revamped the grievance procedure within Indiana's prisons to resolve inmates' gripes informally and as quickly as possible, bypassing paperwork and a previously time-consuming process.

Inmate Larry Bellmore of the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, said the new system, which took effect Dec. 1, quickly resolved his complaint over not receiving his heart medication. It had been discontinued due to an administrative oversight.

"I think the new system is going to work out pretty well," the 59-year-old convicted murderer sentenced out of Morgan County said in a telephone interview. Under the old system, "I would have gone through the old gauntlet before finding out anything."

The new grievance procedure places a greater emphasis on fixing problems inside the Indiana Department of Correction's 30-some prisons informally and has streamlined the five-stop formal process to two steps.

The changes have shaved the time it takes to resolve formal complaints from well over 100 days in some cases to as few as 30 days, said Randy Koester, the chief of staff to Correction Commissioner J. David Donahue.

Speedy resolutions can be critical, considering that about one of every six grievances is health-related. The department holds about 23,000 adult and juvenile offenders, and in a typical month about one in 14 files a grievance.

Prison superintendents or their top aides now must be available to offenders in the dining halls during meals. That's a good time for inmates to approach someone who has the authority to fix a problem, Koester said. For example, if a prisoner is cold in his cell and needs a blanket, the staff should be able to get him a blanket without resorting to the grievance procedure, said Koester, who supervised the grievance changes.

The Department of Correction has a vested interest in ensuring inmates have an efficient, civil procedure for tackling their problems. If not, inmates will look for other ways, including federal lawsuits.

If the informal way doesn't fix the problem, the offender fills out a form and delivers it to the superintendent's executive assistant, whose responsibilities now include tackling the grievances. If the aide can't resolve it, it goes to the department's grievance specialist, Linda VanNatta.

The new system, at least in its early stages, seems more fair to inmates like Bellmore, who estimates he's filed as many as 10 grievances during his nearly 20 years behind bars.

"The old system was pretty much one-sided," he said, adding that there was no opportunity to meet face-to-face with the party creating the problem, and grievances inevitably were denied when appealed to the highest ranks. "You could never depend on it," Bellmore said.

If prisoners don't receive redress within the Department of Correction, they have one other avenue within state government. The Indiana Ombudsman Bureau, which is free of department oversight, receives about 15 letters per day with prisoners' complaints, said Charlene Burkett, director of the bureau since last May.

In short

What's new: The Indiana Department of Correction revamped its grievance procedures for its approximately 23,000 inmates to emphasize working problems out informally and to streamline the formal process from five steps to two.

How many complaints: In a typical month, about one in 14 inmates will file a grievance. The most common complaints are about health care and other services, such as food, mail and visits.

Other outlets: Inmates also can go outside the Department of Correction to the

About the Indiana Department of Correction

The Department employs over 9,000 employees and houses over 23,000 adult offenders and more than 1,000 juveniles, in 33 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>.