



From the front lines at the Department of Corrections

“Many staff are afraid to provide you with any information for fear of retaliation.”

“The bottom line is the people in this passed the buck. It kept getting passed because there was little accountability. Everyone involved in this fiasco knew it was wrong to sit on [this information], but nobody stepped up.”

These comments are among the hundreds of responses received by the Senate when it asked frontline workers at the Department of Corrections -- what went wrong? As part of its investigation of the Department of Corrections' early-release debacle, the Senate Law and Justice Committee asked DOC employees to offer their perspectives.

Their responses place the improper release of more than 3,000 felons into a troubling context.

They describe an agency in which the decisions are made from the top down, communication is discouraged, and few on the front lines are willing to speak up because of the fear of retaliation. The workers urge lawmakers to see the early-release issue as a symptom of a much larger management problem. Said one: “I am truly surprised there is not a much higher rate of accidents/incidents here.”

The responses were generated by the Senate's FixDOC program, which was launched Feb. 4 with an email to all current Department of Corrections employees. “We firmly believe front-line employees can enlighten the Legislature on systemic and cultural problems within their agencies,” it said.

The committee got nearly 300 responses, in the form of emails and submissions to a specially-created webpage, www.fixDOC.org.

All responses to the committee's query are public documents. Although the committee did not require names, many who responded chose to provide contact information anyway. The comments offer tips for investigators and other details that may or may not be verifiable. Full comments are available in files released Monday by members of the Law and Justice Committee. Here are a few excerpts that tell the story in a general way.

Early releases a symptom of a bigger problem

“Records staff here at WCC have told me that they have been telling HQ staff for about 12 years that the sentence structure was [figured] incorrectly, but have been repeatedly told not to worry about it and to release offenders on the dates the computer gave them. This is indicative of greater problems within DOC.”

– *website response No. 6.*

“Because [sentence calculations] are so complicated we have to depend on computers to assist with calculations. ...Under the current system, I have... no way to determine if the classification is correct or not. It is all done by computers because it is so complicated. We are repeatedly told to trust the tool.”

– *website response No. 99.*

“I believe there were line staff who found the problem and reported it to their supervisors who didn’t move it up the chain. Since there are several different pockets of records, it was not the same staff or employee, so it was not noticed as a huge problem. Communication is a huge issue with DOC (and state agencies). Staff are concerned about retaliation even though it is preached that it is not tolerable... it happens. Records staff are VERY valuable staff who understand things that others do not. They need an avenue of reporting issues, as the chain of command does not work unless the supervisors who are extremely busy are directed to report all concerns up the chain, large and small. I believe that it was reported and was not taken seriously because it seemed insignificant.”

– *website response No. 125.*

“I believe this problem had been brought to the attention of counselors by the inmates themselves. They know when they’re supposed to be released. They would have asked the counselors if the dates were correct, whose figures were wrong. The counselor would have gone with the computer’s date, because computers are never wrong. Some of these counselors would have figured the date by pencil and paper, found the mistake, then decided not to rock the boat and not say anything. Contradicting your superior is not good for your career.”

– *website response No. 140.*

“I believe the issue involving the early release of offenders was to save money and keep population numbers low to show how well their programs are working. This is being done at the expense of the safety of the community and the front-line staff. To say it was simply a computer glitch and no one knew about it is simply an insult to the taxpayers of this state. This simply does not add up.”

– *website response No. 6.*

Agency culture

“This agency has conflicting agendas and no stable identity. We don’t know if we are a law enforcement agency or a social service agency. Policies change so rapidly that it’s difficult to manage expectations. ...The bottom line is the people in this passed the buck. It kept getting passed because there was little accountability. Everyone involved in this fiasco knew it was wrong to sit on, but nobody stepped up.”

– *website response No. 140*

“DOC has a culture of showing acceptable results even if the facts do not support the results. If one cannot put blame on someone or something else, the problem is ignored and not dealt with. The lower a person is in the chain of command, the more paranoid they are.”

– *website response No. 94.*

“In order to survive as an exempt employee in DOC, you have to be the ‘yes man’ who brings forward only the good news. As has been demonstrated repeatedly, those who are not in the clique or those who do not march in lock-step with command will simply be erased. ...The upper echelon effectively isolates themselves from valuable information and feedback, as no one wants to be the person to be honest and put a wrinkle in a top leader’s pretty plan. After all, it is much safer to just smile and pretend everything is OK than to raise a concern and risk your future.”

– *website response No. 12.*

“Our upper and middle management are a group of people who do not value critical thinking and trouble shooting. They become defensive when questioned. To move forward in management, it is clearly understood that one needs to be a ‘yes man’ and never cause any waves, put anyone on the spot, ask uncomfortable questions or put forward non-conventional ideas. To do so is highly frowned upon and punishable.”

– *website response No. 119.*

“I would have to say DOC’s hiring and retention practices have led to an upper management of people that feel powerless to question or disregard any policy regardless of the impact in a given situation. In short we have developed a culture in which, if my supervisor said to do it in a certain way, that is the way it will be done. This develops the problems we are seeing at this time, a culture that condones problems and uses committees that carry on for years to misdirect the need for action.”

– *website response No. 136.*

“There is no check and balance within DOC, and any staff who wish to [be promoted] must ‘toe the company line’ and anyone offering ‘objective criticism of ideas’ or better ways of doing business, are quickly ‘blacklisted,’ which is a shame and results in exactly the situation we are suffering through now (inmates being released early). All the executives working in Olympia have to be in lock-step with what has already been decided. We are never genuinely asked what works best, or [for] better, more efficient ways of doing business which make sense to the agency and the taxpayer. ...This results in disastrous results which we see.”

– *website response No. 109.*

“[DOC has] a culture of cronyism, castle building and a recruitment practice more concerned with who is most liked, or has the most formal education, versus experience and past performance. This statement is based on 21 years of watching it happen. ...I see many who are in the upper levels of management ‘screw up and move up,’ yet line staff makes a minor error and are ostracized. ...[There are] not enough people in the trenches doing the actual work. If there were less layers to communicate, the more likely that someone would have fixed the release problem.

– *website response No. 49.*

“I have come to understand that I work for one of the most corrupt departments within state government. It is full of favoritism and nepotism. You have supervisors in positions that have no business being there, for they lack the training and experience for that position. ...As for releasing offenders early, I can see where that could happen for the reasons listed above. Good example – right now, where I’m employed, the staff here are too busy [worrying] whether the offenders like them or not.”

– *website response No. 66.*

“At a certain point, we just need to accept that there is little to no accountability when it comes to the higher ups taking actions that adversely impact the ability of state employees to do work. I mean, just look at this!”

– *website response No. 40.*

Need for independent investigation

“This is a very positive step in holding DOC management accountable for the fraud, waste and abuse that has been occurring for decades. The DOC managers operate under a ‘rule by fear and intimidation’ system of management. Many staff are afraid to provide you with any information for fear of retaliation. Many of us that have worked for the DOC for a number of years have all experienced this retaliation first-hand.”

– *email response No. 23*

“The agency retaliates against those who express serious concerns. We have tried to work out some of these issues with the union, but our union is weak and seems to have their own agenda. ...There are several of us willing to talk to you in person. However, we are scared of the consequences if management finds out. ...We really do appreciate you investigating DOC. It needs to be done.”

– *email response No. 19.*

“I am sorry to say you will probably not get too much feedback on this due to staff in fear of retaliation. It is a difficult place to work, and living in fear of losing our jobs for speaking our mind is what stops line staff feedback.”

--*website response 36.*

“Please keep in mind that the majority of DOC are on your side and we appreciate what you are doing! Please continue to investigate DOC and hold those responsible for the corruption that runs [rampant] accountable!”

– *email response No. 3.*

“We need more space in this area. Can you change this form so that we can send in more than 1,000 characters?”

– *website response No. 47.*