

Thomas D. Williams, Jr.
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The Honorable Edward R. Tallon, Sr.
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Representative Tallon, let me introduce myself. My name is Thomas D. Williams, Jr., the former Deputy Director for Rehabilitative Services with South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice. I want to thank you and the Legislative Oversight Committee for the diligent work to get to the root and cause of a very dysfunctional agency. It's unfortunate I got caught up in the whirlwind that has been spiraling out of control for some time now even under previous Directors. This fiasco began declining approximately 6 years ago with what was introduced as Balanced and Restorative Justice, the sound and concept of this is fantastic in a community setting where children are usually remorseful about the crime they committed. At the introduction of this concept, the reality of a correctional setting was thrown out the window because a juvenile with an infraction (assault, fighting, sexual misconduct, etc.) had to do was have a conference with his victim, be mediated, write an apology letter, complete sanctions and life continues as usual. IN A PERFECT WORLD, THIS WOULD BE AWESOME. But we are not dealing in a perfect world in a correctional facility. The agency loss a lot of seasoned employed behind this new Balanced and Restorative Justice concept. This began the road to destruction with SCDJJ. All order and control was compromised with BARJ (Balanced and Restorative Justice). To maintain security, order and control became secondary.

As the agency made a move to look less correctional and more community oriented, a lot of changes took place. The committee talked about the process of being able to handle riots and other situations. Well, SCDJJ had a Rapid Response Team that was dismantled by the previous Director because it looked too much like police and authority. Buildings were torn down and other buildings used for non-security related programs. This was done with the mindset if we don't have the space, they (courts) won't send them. Staff were striped of the authoritative uniform look to a softer look with polo shirts.

In the effort to reduce the number of juveniles behind the fence and make the agency look good, SCDJJ began moving juveniles out to the different camps contracted to house juveniles in a step down process. Again, the focus became more on the number of juveniles behind the fence than the proper juvenile being stepped down. This created numbers of juvenile returning to the agency because they usually go AWOL from the camps. Two juveniles I can recall particularly shouldn't have gone to a camp, went AWOL and was gone for months before being captured. One had to be extradited from another state. Between the Balanced and Restorative Justice and the Stepdown Process without the input of the correctional staff created a "hands off" environment which further lead to the road of destruction for SCDJJ. Staff was in fear of losing their jobs and being prosecuted for doing their jobs, the juveniles began to sense this shift of control and used it to their advantage compromise the system.

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Another area that went from SCDJJ was programming. When I began my career at SCDJJ in the early 90's, I was very instrumental in the first JROTC Unit behind the fence. This program worked well from the young men and women. They wanted to be a part of this elite program. It gave them hope and purpose. We had qualified retired military people running the unit. As Deputy Director, I advocated about going back to this kind of programming. We had another unit called The Start Program, another program that worked wonders in juvenile's lives. We didn't see a lot of recidivism out of those units. SCDJJ has become more on cost than rehabilitating juvenile's lives. As it stands today and some years since the above mentioned programs stop existing juveniles have nothing but furniture upholstery and Young Craftsmen and that's because these programs produce products to sell at The Store of Hope. Both programs would only take a handful of "so call good juveniles" to work in these programs. The other 115 were left with nothing but an idle mind and basketball. So, when you have 120 young people with no treatment, no programming, no structure you get what SCDJJ is experiencing "total chaos" and plenty of incidents.

The question was asked, how SCDJJ can have so much going on with a 120 juvenile incarcerated juvenile. Well, let me explain that. The 120 juveniles behind the fence are sentenced through the courts to secure facilities because they are deemed to be a threat to the community, the public, and need intensive treatment and programming. If they are a threat to the community, why shouldn't they be considered a threat to the order of the agency? That is not happening at SCDJJ and some of the juveniles are dangerous individuals but are treated like a kid in the community. I am a firm believer that security has to be at the forefront because without security you can't treat, you can't teach and no one is safe. I also believe security and treatment should work hand in hand to accomplish the goal of rehabilitating the lives of our young people.

Infrastructure is another area that lead to the road of destruction for SCDJJ. Buildings were built without security experts to in my opinion. I'm to assume the building was built for change but the agency didn't change to meet the expectation of the new buildings. The juveniles began to manipulate the security when you can easily break glass that shouldn't be there in the first place, juvenile being able to climb to the top of the roof to gain access to the outside, building built without doors to secure juveniles in the living area, I can go on and on. The most frustrating piece was a building that could only hold eight females in which SCDJJ always had more than eight but they would be held at the evaluations centers waiting for a bed behind the fence, totally ridiculous and unacceptable of an agency that the State of South Carolina entrust to fix children's lives. The agency present no solution for the new age of juveniles entering the system.

The education system is another weak and failing part of SCDJJ. As you know, most juveniles enter the system are not going to school anyway. They are below proper reading levels and some can't read at all. Some are in middle school, some in high school but SCDJJ have only one school that does not fit all. Can't get enough qualified teachers to teacher. So, you have juveniles who want to learn with juveniles who can't read in the same class. The school overall is the meeting place for a majority of the incidents that occur on campus. Common sense would tell me, I can't run this school like a normal high school. And it shouldn't be expected to run that way.

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Policies and procedures are outdated and lack substance for a hardware secure agency. Again, a lot of changes need to take place before others have to lose their careers because of an agency that has not been willing to change. An agency looking good building houses but not changing lives, an agency upholstering furniture but juveniles assaulting staff, an agency more focused on the outside than retaining happy and dedicated staff on the inside. You can't judge a book by its cover, referring to SCDJJ. All things that look good, are not always good. Now is the time to put the proper resources in place to get this agency where it needs in fulfilling its mission "protecting the public and reclaiming juveniles through prevention, community programs, education, and rehabilitative services in the least restrictive environment". We are obligated to restoring the youth back to their deserved and rightful place.....productive citizens that can contribute to society. I talked about some options as Deputy that would not only think outside the box but remove the box to meet a challenging populations of young men and women. The agency need to be regionalized. As I close, the most disturbing thing to me is the agency don't have a way of tracking its success. Again, I love the agency, I still believe in the process. I have dedicated my entire life to law enforcement and state government. I would welcome the opportunity to meet and discuss this letter in more detail and provide my input for change because I am not on the outside looking in, I was on the inside looking out with over 20 years of experience from juvenile corrections, deputy sheriff, State Constable in public housing and adult detention. The way the agency do business has got to change. Thank you sir for your time.

Sincerely,

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Cc: The Honorable Katherine Arrington
The Honorable William Hixon

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