

The CAP TIMES

R.L. McNeely: Use monitoring and oversight to minimize abuse in prisons

- **Felmers O. Chaney Advocacy Board** (<https://www.fcab-mke.org/>)
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Dear Editor: Would it surprise you to know that there were 132 claims of staff-on-inmate and staff-on-staff sexual abuse occurring within the Wisconsin Department of Corrections in 2017? Would it surprise you to know that for sexual abuse alone, Wisconsin paid out \$800,000 during the last decade in damage claims? Finally, would it surprise you to know there is a tool that can be used to minimize this sort of aggression and a variety of other correctional center abuses?

That tool is monitoring and oversight. It involves placing an entity, such as a board or an ombudsman, in a statutorily codified position to observe and investigate prison behavior. It's an idea just beginning to gain attention in the U.S. but that already has been operating effectively in a number of European countries.

Why do these mechanisms work? Oversight is the regular monitoring and investigation, when needed, of prison conditions. Oversight is about making a prison's operations transparent and creating internal accountability procedures. This can occur when an independent board or ombudsman's staff have meetings on the prison site and access to prison staff, administration, inmates, and the prison's records. With transparency, the public as well as the prison's administration know whether the objectives of the prison are being achieved. Too, staff are less likely to treat inmates and each other inappropriately when they know that a statutorily independent board or department with transparent access can review their actions. This, in turn, helps to professionalize the behavior of staff.

Experiences elsewhere suggest that those include averted lawsuits, averted injuries, improved health conditions, lessened violence, less use of force, improved morale, improved programs, lessened recidivism, etc. Monitoring and oversight – why not?

R.L. McNeely, chair

Felmers O. Chaney Advocacy Board