

Letters

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Independent oversight needed

The recent debacle involving allegations of beatings, sexual assaults and other forms of child physical abuse by inmates and staff at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake juvenile facilities could have been prevented or greatly mitigated. Indeed, a Racine judge once characterized conditions at Lincoln Hills as being "sordid and inexcusable."

There are any number of best practices that Wisconsin's Department of Corrections could entertain to avoid or minimize these problems. A best practices technique, rarely discussed, is that of a citizen's advisory board with statutorily sanctioned monitoring and oversight capabilities.

Many correctional experts believe that independent prison oversight is a sine qua non for the safe operation of prisons for both prisoners and staff. Indeed, one of the conditions noted at Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake was that of staff battering each other.

"Oversight" is the regular monitoring and investigation, when needed, of prison conditions. But the monitoring/oversight mechanism cannot be an entity that serves at the pleasure of, or is selected by, a department of corrections. It cannot be a guild or a community relations board.

Instead, oversight should be understood as a tool that is designed to aid in the effort to professionalize the field of corrections. Community boards with an oversight function help to guarantee that prisoners are treated with dignity and respect. This, in turn, helps to professionalize the behavior of staff. Data also indicate that the presence of an independent community board helps to reduce ex-offender recidivism.

Statutorily set oversight authority is common in England. Perhaps it is time to consider the practice here. These boards, however, have been found to work better in metropolitan areas vs. rural areas.

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