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"Milestone" Accord

Prison Pact Ends Out-Of-Title Work For Professionals

By Ronald Kermani
Editor

Professionals working in state prisons no longer push mops, haul garbage or perform other out-of-title work during scheduled lockdowns as part of a major labor/management pact hammered out with the state recently.

The agreement is a milestone in two areas. It is a significant victory for the Corrections L/M team and provides a lasting solution to a problem which has plagued PEF members working in prisons for years.

After six years of trying to change the out-of-title work practice, PEF L/M chair for Corrections, Robert Alexander, signed a memorandum of understanding with Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Thomas Coughlin in mid-October.

About 2,800 PEF members in various job titles, such as teachers, nurses, and chaplains, are affected by the agreement.

"This is PEF at its best," exclaimed President Rand Condell. "This agreement dramatically increases the respect and recognition the state has for our union," added Condell, a former prison teacher who also lugged garbage during lockdowns at the Great Meadow Correctional Facility in Comstock.

Alexander, who assumed the chair of the



CORRECTIONS BREAKTHROUGH — Members of PEF's labor/management team for Corrections recently celebrated the signing of a pact which stops the practice of out-of-title work during scheduled prison lockdowns. State Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Thomas Coughlin, seated at right, inks the agreement while Robert Alexander, center, chair of the L/M committee, looks on. Also seated is Joe Lewis. Standing, from left to right, are committee members Mike Valentino, Dick Collins, Morris Marcus, Sally Kellam, Bill Parolari, Peter Willis, David Grier, Doug Allen and Mike Corbett.

Corrections L/M committee a year ago, called the accord "a milestone."

"It's been so frustrating and demeaning for our people — professionals — who were forced to do inmate jobs such as mopping and hauling garbage," Alexander said. "This is welcome relief."

Specifically, the agreement permits PS&T employees to perform their regular jobs and responsibilities during non-emergency shutdowns, such as scheduled frisks and maintenance operations.

During scheduled sergeant exams, the department must notify PEF at least 60 days before the test if the department plans to assign PS&T members according to the memo.

PEF and department officials will then meet to try to resolve outstanding items important to either party.

Previously, PEF members were ordered by prison administrators to perform jobs such as mopping

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state and federal regulations, according to the audit report.

"Inadequate management," poor administrative practices, the lack of medical, clinical and nutrition services, and the absence of staff training and client leisure time activities were also cited in the audit.

A Dangerous Example

Some of the Bronx center's problems were potentially dangerous, auditors found.

"Due to staff shortages, the two visually impaired classes (24 clients)

and objects were thrown, clients were exhibiting aggressive behaviors towards other clients and staff.

"Four clients were placed outside to sit on the ground without supervision," auditors wrote.

Staff shortages regularly create similar situations hazardous to both clients and staff, DiSanto said.

"In the case of behavior situations, the staff may not be able to protect themselves or the clients," she added.

The department has the second

time, money, staff and administrative support have poured into the Bronx facility in an effort to correct the problems, reverse the decertification, and keep the federal financial spigot wide open.

The cure, however, has created some problems, staff members said.

"Since the auditors first crossed the portals at the Bronx center, our work world has literally been turned upside down," said PEF steward Lilly Hall.

Center administrators have asked the staff to put in extra effort to keep

adequate programs, lose about \$25 million in federal aid if programs aren't improved and the decertification reversed.

"The loss of \$25 million means jobs," Salerno said.

"Employees are inundated with paperwork. There is a severe shortage of hands-on staff to meet federal rules," he added. "Vacations have been cancelled. There is massive forced overtime."

Unlike the Bronx center, OMR administrators have not hired additional staff to bring programs into compliance with federal regulations, Salerno said.

The Long Island facility is also undergoing a "reconfiguration" which will reduce the number of residential clients from about 1,250 in 1985 to 300 clients in 1991.

Hailed as a cost-saving measure, reconfiguration allows the state's contracting with cheaper, private agencies for some client care.

Meanwhile, auditors continue to note deficiencies in other OMR facilities across the state. Additional decertifications, and the greater threat of lost federal money are possible.

"Centers are overburdened and understaffed," DiSanto said, adding PEF officials will continue to meet with management to identify and solve problems.

Staff problems persist, DiSanto continued.

"It's difficult to promote dedication and the use of talent among many professionals who have given as much as they can give, are burned out, and have passed their thresholds of endurance," DiSanto said.

Corrections Agreement . . .

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floors or hauling garbage while the inmates, who normally perform those tasks, were locked in their cells during the frisks.

The out-of-title work issue was resolved after years of negotiations with department officials.

David Grier, who headed the L/M team before Alexander, worked hard to solve the problem, Condell said. "He was always consistent on the issues," Condell said about Grier's leadership.

After his selection as chairman, Alexander used the foundation Grier had built to try to make some headway.

"We were butting heads," Alexander said about the committee's relationship with the department. "It was time to turn over a new leaf."

Alexander proposed a new format for L/M meetings with Coughlin.

PEF would give Coughlin an agenda one month before the scheduled session. Position papers outlining the issues, background, PEF's position and recommended solutions were also included.

"They now have a month to do their homework," Alexander said about the new process, "and it's working great."

The pair also agreed to meet where the problems start — behind the massive block walls where clanging gates, bells, and corrections officer's commands are a way of life.

"Management deserves a pat on the back for coming to the forum and working with us to solve this long-standing issue," said Condell. "We are coming to the middle ground that is livable for both sides.

"This also says these changes are for the good of the department's goals and objectives," he added.

The agreement has been well received by the members, union officials said.

"This is one of the greatest victories we've ever had in any statewide agency," said Morris Marcus, a vocational instructor at Woodburne Correctional Facility and a member of the PEF L/M committee. "It restores pride in our professions."