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Reporting on Prison Privatization and Related Issues

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Youngstown Break-Out Leads to Political, Financial Fallout

On July 25, 1998 a half-dozen prisoners, including four convicted murderers, cut through two fences and escaped from the CCA-operated Northeast Ohio Correctional Center in Youngstown, Ohio. According to Warden Jimmy Turner the successful break-out was due to errors by prison employees, including guards leaving their posts, not watching their designated areas and not promptly responding to motion sensor alarms.

The escape was the latest in a series of embarrassing incidents at the problem-plagued facility, which houses approximately 1,500 inmates from Washington, D.C.; CCA previously had been under a court order to remove maximum-security inmates from the medium-security prison. Michael J. Quinlan, the company's director of planning, promised that CCA would learn from its mistakes and would improve staff training at the facility.

Ohio lawmakers, however, were not interested in apologies or excuses. State Senator Jeff Johnson observed that the escape highlighted

a major distinction between public and privately-operated prisons. "I've been to Ohio prisons, and we have some problems," he said. "The difference is if the manager screws up and lets six people escape in broad daylight, we have the authority to get him out of there."

Also of concern was CCA's response to the break-out. Prison records indicate the first motion detector alarms went off at 1:06 p.m., though it was not until 3:09 p.m. that the escape was reported to local law enforcement officials. According to Youngstown police captain Robert Kane, when officers arrived at the facility they initially were told there was no problem even though armed prison guards were searching the surrounding fields and woods. Said Kane, "In my opinion the escape was not reported promptly or properly."

Youngstown Mayor George McKelvey was more blunt, stating, "The facts lead one to believe there was an attempt to deceive the police or cover up the event." CCA termed the idea of a cover-up "ridiculous."

Following the escape Ohio Gov. George Voinovich announced he was seeking a way to close the facility, but a legal analysis by the Attorney General's office concluded that the state did not have authority to do so. Ironically the governor's brother, Paul Voinovich, a prison architect, had lobbied the city of Youngstown for the facility and served as a consultant to CCA.

U.S. Rep. James Traficant (D-OH) quickly pushed through the House an amendment calling for a federal study on prison privatization that would examine security procedures. "The on-going problems at the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center in Youngstown should serve as a wake-up call to the nation," Traficant said. "We need to identify possible security and personnel shortfalls at private prisons and effectively address them." Further, U.S. Sen. Mike DeWine (R-OH), a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said that he would seek a hearing in regard to classification problems at the Youngstown facility. [continued ⇨]

Wall Street reacted negatively to news of the escape: CCA's stock slid 20% to a 52-week low within ten days of the incident. Brian Ruttenbur of Suntrust Equitable Securities, a finance firm that encourages investment in private prison companies, termed the Ohio situation a "public relations problem." CCA spokeswoman Peggy Lawrence called criticism of the company "very unfair" and "very frustrating."

Meanwhile, agents with the U.S. Attorney's Office and the U.S. Marshals Service began an investigation into whether a CCA guard had assisted with the break-out. While company officials declined to comment publicly, Doctor R. Crants, CCA's C.E.O., admitted in a letter to Governor Voinovich that they suspected "a single female employee collaborated with inmates to plan the escape."

Five of the six escapees were caught within two days. Under an Ohio law enacted last March, CCA will have to reimburse city, state and federal authorities for the cost of the search.

On August 3, 1998 CCA announced it would transfer about 200 close security inmates from Youngstown to other facilities within one month; U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno said they would be moved to federal prisons or a state facility in Virginia. Federal and D.C. authorities are also establishing a full-time monitor at Youngstown. □

Sources: *The Tennessean*, July 29, Aug. 6, Aug. 12, 1998; *Commercial Appeal* (TN), July 26, Aug. 5, 1998; *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 5, 1998; *The Columbus Dispatch*, July 30, July 31, 1998; *The Alliance Review* (OH), July 27, 1998.

Abuse Cited at Private Juvenile Facility

Last year an investigation by the U.S. Justice Department found that guards at the privately-operated Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth in Madison Parish, Louisiana routinely beat juvenile offenders at the facility. A more recent report indicates modest improvements: The main threat is no longer from the guards but from other adolescent inmates — especially for mentally ill juveniles whom, investigators say, are dumped into the general prison population where they are frequently victimized.

In a one-week period last May, 70 of the 620 boys at Tallulah were sent to the infirmary after being involved in fights. Many had cuts and bruises; one had been raped. Another youth pleaded not to be returned to a dormitory where he said another inmate had been sexually abusing him for weeks. And a former juvenile offender, a 16-year-old who spent 18 months at the facility for stealing a bike, said inmates often fought each other over food and clothes.

"It's utterly perverse," said David Utter, director of the Juvenile Justice Project. "They have this place that creates all these injuries and they have all these kids with mental disorders, and then they save money by not treating them."

Federal investigators condemned the excessive amount of violence and reported the facility had the highest injury rate among Louisiana's four juvenile prisons. They also found abusive and inhumane conditions, including children as young as twelve being kept in cramped solitary confinement cells for up to 20 hours a day, for weeks at a time.

A federal prosecutor cited the report when he asked a U.S. District Court judge to block a proposed 80-bed expansion at Tallulah. "The facility continues to fail to provide adequate protection from harm, adequate mental health and medical care, and adequate educational services," said United States Attorney L.J. Hymel. The expansion was also opposed by John Whitley, a former warden of Louisiana's Angola prison who is acting as a consultant to the federal court.

State corrections officials disputed many of the report's findings and said they were working to address existing problems, but conceded that mentally ill juveniles were improperly housed with general population inmates. Investigators say the warden is trying to improve conditions at the center but is failing due to a high staff turnover rate and a facility in a "serious state of breakdown." Guards at Tallulah are paid \$5.77 an hour, which has led to a 100% staff turnover in the past year.

U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN) visited the Tallulah facility on July 1, hearing from juveniles who complained about bad food, inadequate clothing, deficient educational services, and the constant threat of physical and sexual assaults. At one point five youths climbed onto the roof of a prison building to voice their concerns.

Louisiana pays TransAmerican Development Associates, Inc. \$71.00 a day per juvenile inmate to operate the Tallulah facility — \$16 million a year when the prison is at capacity. The company's principal directors include George Fischer, who headed the state's highway [continued ⇨]

department under former Governor Edwin Edwards; Verdi Adams, a former state highway engineer who has had other business dealings with Fischer; and James Brown, the son of late state senator Charles Brown.

On July 22 Louisiana officials took control of the Tallulah center following a disturbance by 15 juveniles and the resignation of Warden David Bonnette, sending in a team of 35 guards from the state's adult corrections system. Earlier that month a class-action lawsuit had been filed by the Juvenile Justice Project on behalf of twelve adolescent inmates housed at the facility. □

Sources: *The Jackson Sun* (TN), July 5, 1998; *Corrections Digest*, July 10, 1998; *The New York Times*, July 15, July 24, 1998; *U.S.A. Today*, July 29, 1998.

NOTE: In addition to the reported abuses at Tallulah and the recent death of a youth at a privately-run juvenile camp in Arizona (see p.4), a youth facility in Brush, Colorado operated by Rebound, Inc. closed last April amid complaints of mismanagement and misconduct.

WANTED

Articles, clippings and news reports regarding the private corrections industry — please include the source and date of all materials submitted.

Send to:

P.C.I. News Bulletin
3193-A Parthenon Avenue
Nashville, TN 37203

Inmate Alleges Abuse, Accident During TransCor Trip

Last May, convicted murderer and prison escapee James Michael Douglas was extradited from Florida to Ohio by TransCor America, a private inmate transportation service and subsidiary of CCA. According to Douglas he was among 11 prisoners in a TransCor van that crashed in southern Indiana after the driver fell asleep at the wheel.

Although several inmates suffered minor injuries, the transport officers were primarily concerned with changing vehicles and making up for lost time, Douglas said. A county sheriff who noticed the accident ordered that the prisoners be taken to a local hospital.

Davey Tucker, TransCor's Chief Operating Officer, refused to verify that an accident had occurred; however, Ohio Department of Rehabilitation spokeswoman Andrea Dean acknowledged that Douglas was involved in the crash. Further, Saint Mary's Hospital in Warrick County, Indiana confirmed that Douglas was treated and released on May 2.

Douglas also stated that during the six-day trip he and other inmates were given little food and water and were pepper-sprayed without justification, and that he was chained in hog-tie fashion and threatened by TransCor officers. Tucker said his company follows acceptable law enforcement standards: "Our business is based upon the fact that these are high flight-risk individuals." □

Source: *The Other Paper* (OH), July 3, 1998.

In the News

CCA has signed an agreement with Tulsa County, Oklahoma to manage a 1,440-bed jail for adult and juvenile offenders. At capacity, annual revenues from the contract will exceed \$17 million; the county is building and financing the facility, which is scheduled to open in April '99. The private jail was opposed by the Tulsa County Sheriff's Dept., which had sued to block the project. Source: *The Tennessean*, July 28, 1998.

Montana has signed a contract with CCA to build and operate the state's first private prison; the \$25 million 500-bed facility will be located in Shelby. The contract was finalized after corrections officials asked a district court to dissolve a temporary restraining order blocking construction of the prison. Sources: *U.S.A. Today*, July 15, July 23, 1998.

After five years of unsuccessful contract bids, U.K. Detention Services (UKDS), a subsidiary of CCA, has signed an agreement to design, build and manage an 800-bed medium-security prison in Agecroft, Salford, England. The 25-year contract is expected to generate \$13 million in annual revenues; the facility is scheduled to open in January 2000. UKDS also operates HM Prison Blakenhurst in Worcestershire, England. Source: *The Tennessean*, July 8, 1998.

Youth Dies at Private Juvenile Camp

On March 2, 1998, Nicholas Contreras, 16, collapsed and died after being forced to do physical exercise at the Arizona Boys Ranch (ABR) in Oracle, Arizona. The Pima Co. Medical Examiner determined that Nick's death was a result of empyema, a build-up of fluid in the lining between the lungs and the chest cavity; he also suffered from strep and staph infections, chronic bronchitis and pneumonia.

In the days prior to his death Nick had complained to ABR employees about being sick, and had been defecating and urinating on himself and vomiting. ABR staff responded by forcing him to do push-ups and subjecting him to humiliation; one staff member told him he should receive an Academy Award for faking. Although Nick was examined by the camp nurse and doctor, both failed to diagnose his condition despite his obvious symptoms and 20-pound weight loss.

Nick Contreras was one of more than 1,000 California juvenile offenders sent to privately-operated out-of-state facilities. Following Nick's death several Arizona and California agencies began investigations into conditions at ABR, which has had about 100 child abuse claims lodged against it within the past five years.

California authorities found mistreatment and abuse, and said they would no longer pay to send youths there. According to a summary of a 600-page report by the California Social Services Dept., "Nicholaus' death was caused by prolonged and serious medical neglect and openly conducted abusive treatment. He suf-

fered physical and psychological abuse and his personal rights were continually violated."

About 220 California juveniles remain at the facility. Said Social Services Department Director Eloise Anderson, "If I had the authority to remove these kids, I would bring them home or place them in a safe facility today."

ABR officials, who temporarily closed the ranch to improve staff training and medical services, placed the blame on several employees who "totally disregarded established disciplinary policies." Two staff members were fired and four were put on administrative leave, including the camp director. The county attorney is considering criminal prosecution.

ABR, based in Queen Creek, Arizona, operates seven wilderness/boot camp-type facilities for juvenile offenders — the company recruits nationally and charges \$3,600 per month for each youth. The operating license for the Oracle youth camp has been extended until September 1 while the Arizona Dept. of Economic Security finishes an investigation into whether a pattern of systemic abuse exists at the facility.

Nick Contreras had been sent to the Arizona Boys Ranch for stealing a car and failing drug rehab programs. According to Joe Contreras, Nick's uncle, ABR officials initially told the family that Nick committed suicide by going on a hunger strike. □

Sources: *The Boston Sunday Globe*, July 5, 1998; *The New York Times*, July 9, 1998; *Corrections Digest*, July 10, 1998.

Other Private Corrections Industry Resources

The Corrections and Criminal Justice Coalition (CCJC), which represents unionized government corrections employees, strongly opposes prison privatization. Address: 7700 Leesburg Pike #421, Falls Church, VA 22043; web site: www.ccjc.com.

The *Prison Privatisation Report International*, a publication of the non-profit Prison Reform Trust, is published ten times a year. Highly recommended! Subscription rates are £25 for individuals, £50 for public or non-profit agencies and £100 for corporations or businesses. Address: Prison Reform Trust, 15 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AH. Phone: ++44-171-251-5070; e-mail: prisonreform@prisonreform.demon.co.uk.

CONFERENCE

A national conference and strategy session on the "Prison Industrial Complex," which includes the for-profit corrections industry, will be held at U.C. Berkeley from Sept. 25 to 27, 1998. There is no registration fee for individuals though donations, which are tax deductible, are appreciated. Representatives from universities or other major institutions are requested to pay \$75.00. Contact:

Critical Resistance, P.O. Box 339, Berkeley, CA 94701 (510) 643-2094; e-mail: critresist@aol.com; web site: www.igc.org/justice/critical.