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OPINION

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Editorial

SLED probe affirms prisons need help; lawmakers must act

A STATE LAW Enforcement Division investigation into a 2007 prison break revealed what we already knew, and have failed to remedy, about S.C. prisons: They're dangerously understaffed.

Despite passing laws advancing a lock 'em up policy, state lawmakers have never given the Department of Corrections adequate resources to perform its mission. While the number of inmates has increased, the number of guards has decreased as the Corrections budget has shrunk. The result: Things have decayed to the point where inmates, prison employees and the public aren't safe.

It's no surprise when an inmate takes flight.

SLED's investigation into the escape of two inmates from a maximum-security prison in Columbia last August found that civilian employees — not prison guards — were overseeing about 120 prisoners. The one correctional officer assigned to the area from which the inmates escaped was at a training class, leaving four civilian employees responsible for supervising and performing three head counts.

Corrections officials readily admit that there was no officer there. Had there been, there probably wouldn't have been an escape, they said. "We didn't have anybody to replace him with that day," said prisons spokesman Josh Gelinas.

Corrections officials blame the civilians, who get only minimal security training, for failing to adequately supervise the inmates. Some staff, whom the department would not identify, have been disciplined. A senior security official was demoted in rank and salary, a private employee was suspended for two weeks, and one Corrections employee resigned before disciplinary action could be taken, the department said.

This never should have happened. Corrections must ensure that inmates are covered by trained guards at all times. But this isn't simply a matter of Corrections falling down on the job. Budget restraints have forced tough choices that compromise safety.

That's the way lawmakers have chosen to operate many of this state's agencies. Our highways are more dangerous because there are too few troopers. Local hospitals and jails are overrun by mental health patients because there are too few resources and mental health beds. Bridges and roads are unsafe because of too little money for repair. Thousands of poor children are without health care.

Prisons officials, in a rare move, acknowledge that, although employees were at fault, budget constraints prevent them from staffing all posts. Guard posts around the perimeter of the prison are unmanned. One post is yards from where the inmates climbed the fence.

Prisons by nature are difficult to operate. They're dangerous to operate underfunded. Our system has suffered successive budget cuts from 1999 through 2003. Since 1999 it has lost 1,200 employees, but gained 3,000 more inmates.

Lawmakers share part of the blame for Corrections' problems, and they should help correct them. They can start by approving the agency's request for \$9.6 million to hire 228 new officers. Also, they should adopt Attorney General Henry McMaster's "middle court" program that would divert nonviolent inmates from prisons using alternative sentencing methods.

If leaders fail to improve prison security, stay tuned for the next escape. And the next one, and the next one.

Robert Ariail



Letters to the Editor

Teachers need chance to work, not relax

Although much gratitude is to be accorded to Jim Anthony for his generous donation of land for a teacher retreat in the wilderness where, as Clemson president James Barker puts it, "a large component of this should be reflection, to look across the lake at a sunset and ask themselves why they became a teacher in the first place," this is not what we teachers need.

We need more and regular work days during which we can work on lesson plans, collaborate with other teachers and catch up on grading without bells ringing and students and administrators around. There is nothing more peaceful than an empty school. I don't need a lake to look out across and ponder the reasons I became a teacher. It's been 18 years, and my reasons for being a teacher are constantly evolving. So far, so good.

There is this perception among the general public that teachers require a lot of attention through professional development, workshops, motivational speakers and wilderness retreats. But there is nothing like walking into an empty school, once or twice a month, knowing that I have time to do what needs to be done. I submit to you that most teachers feel this way.

Of course, more workdays mean a "longer" school year. I can handle that with no problem. Were we to have one workday per month in addition to the five we have now, it would mean school would go into June by a few days. That's no big deal if you really want to improve teachers' working conditions and retention.

One last idea: If you business

Send us your letters

Letters of 200 words or fewer may be e-mailed to stateeditor@thestate.com or mailed to P.O. Box 1333, Columbia, S.C. 29202. We do not guarantee publication.

leaders and politicians (that includes Education Superintendent Jim Rex) want to really make an impact on teacher quality, bring back the sabbatical.

DAVID LETTIS
Columbia

Police chief candidate grateful for support

I would like to thank all those individuals who have contacted me and written letters on my behalf in regard to the selection of the next police chief of the city of Columbia. I have been both humbled and honored by the kind words and enormous support that many people in this great city and the surrounding area have expressed about my character, integrity and spirit.

Throughout my career, I have strived to be honest, fair and professional in all my endeavors and decisions. It warms my heart to see the number of people who have appreciated those qualities over the years, and continue to. I enjoy helping to make the place we live a better place, and I will continue to do my part as a lawyer, law enforcement officer and citizen of our great city, and Richland County. It was important and beneficial for Columbia to have so many people involved in the selection process

for police chief, regardless of which candidate one might have supported.

Please allow me to be among the first to congratulate Tandy Carter on being selected for this distinguished honor. I wish him the best of luck as he begins a new era at the Columbia Police Department.

DANIEL E. JOHNSON
Columbia

Elect Gergel to turn city in right direction

I applaud *The State's* endorsement of Belinda Gergel for the District 3 City Council seat. Belinda has been my teacher, mentor and friend since my days as a student at Columbia College.

While at the college, Belinda inspired hundreds of women such as I with her knowledge, charisma and commitment to higher learning and community service.

Her wisdom, integrity and ability are second to none, and she will serve Columbia well.

Electing Belinda Gergel to City Council will mark a critical turn in the right direction for the future of Columbia.

CARLA LEWIS MOORE
Columbia

Boyer's independence will serve city well

Tuesday is shaping up to be one of the most important election days in a very long time for the city of Columbia. At stake is the progress that has been made over the last several years to restore good governance, sound financial stewardship and a focus on basic services for the city.

We no longer see the calamities previously offered by City Council such as Air South and the convention center hotel. A new makeup on council is focusing on investing more in police and fire protection, reinvesting in infrastructure such as water and sewer and putting our financial house in order.

In order to maintain this direction, I strongly encourage the residents of District 3 to vote for Brian Boyer. Most people are aware by now of Brian's local roots, decorated military service and success as a small businessman.

Since the issues of today will not be the issues of tomorrow, Brian's independence and judgment will be the keys to his leadership.

MARK JAMES
Columbia

S.C. needs Sanford too much to lose him

In reference to your recent editorial that said Sen. John McCain should not pick Gov. Mark Sanford as his vice president, I could not agree with you more.

After all, Gov. Sanford is an elected official who holds his ground based on principle, regardless of the political cost, a message that wouldn't be understood inside the Washington Beltway. Gov. Sanford also correctly points out overspending to our Legislature, a message that would be lost in Congress.

A third, and most important reason, is: We need him too much in South Carolina!

STEPHANIE HAILE
Columbia

On Saturdays, you'll find us on the Web

SINCE YOU'RE reading this, we can assume you found us in our new location. Actually, Page D2 is sort of an old location for the Sunday editorial page. We were here for many years before jumping to the A section a little more than a year ago.

Being back on D2 feels like home to me; I hope it will make our pages more convenient each week for you as well.

But my purpose today is not to talk about a change already made, but one coming up. And this one is going to feel a lot less familiar to all of us.

Starting six days from now, we will no longer publish opinion and commentary pages on Saturdays in *The State*. Instead, we'll unveil a new Web page featuring content of the sort that we would have published in the paper, only more of it. The new page will be called "Saturday Opinion Extra."

Why are we doing this? Two reasons, which I'll keep as simple as possible:

■ We have to cut costs.

■ There are things we can do online we can't do in the paper.

Now, about the cost-cutting:

You may have read that newspapers don't make as much money as they used to. We still make money, just not as much as the stock market demands. And when you're a publicly traded company, you have no options: Making less money is something shareholders don't stand for.

So you do two things: You work like crazy to bring in more revenue, which is not my department. And you cut costs, which does involve the editorial staff.

When we lost one writing position three years ago, we eliminated staff-written copy from our Monday pages. Now, faced with further reductions, we're eliminating editorials from another day, plus eliminating two pages of newsprint a week.



Brad Warthen
Editorial Page Editor

page, we'll be able to give you several op-ed pages worth of columns from the likes of David Broder, Kathleen Parker, Maureen Dowd, David Brooks, Thomas Friedman, Cal Thomas, Paul Krugman and Charles Krauthammer.

■ Add to that at least one column from a local writer, just as you would normally have received on Saturdays. But the particular columns we put online might be something you'd never have got-

ten in the paper. We often get more than one column in a month from such newsmakers as Gov. Mark Sanford (Columbia Mayor Bob Coble has submitted *three* this past month). But since space in the paper is at such a premium, we try to limit each writer to no more than one a month. We also turn down most columns that other newspapers have published. So we turn down some interesting, relevant columns — but finite space in the paper demands tough choices. Online space is virtually unlimited, so you'll get additional chances to read what newsmakers, and others, are thinking.

■ You will see at least as many letters to the editor online as you would have received in the paper, with the added bonus that some of them will be letters held out for no reason other than that they were too long for our page, and didn't lend themselves to trimming.

■ We regularly shoot video during editorial board interviews with newsmakers. I've been using some

of it on my blog the last couple of years, but sporadically; the Saturday Opinion Extra page gives us a place to showcase some of the most interesting footage from the past week.

■ You'll find links to such things as a new, improved page devoted to Robert Ariail's recent cartoons, featuring such DVD-style bonus features as unpublished sketches, archives, and video of Robert talking about what he does. (There will also be links to recent posts on my blog, of course.)

That's the content we'll be starting with, and I hope you will suggest more.

This is a big and scary step for us in the editorial department. We have always published editorial and op-ed pages daily, and departing from that feels a little like stepping off something firm and secure into thin air.

But like skydiving, it's also pretty exciting. Ever since the 1980s — since before there was a Worldwide Web — I've been interested in the potential of an elec-

tronic opinion forum, with immediacy and interactivity you can't get on paper. That's why I started the blog; this takes us another step.

Sure, we've let our paper content flow onto the Web for years, but we've hardly scratched the surface of what we can do there in the opinion realm. The editorial board needs to turn some attention to better serving the 800,000 unique visitors who come to thestate.com each month.

Please check out this new feature on Saturday, and let us know what you think of it. Much more than a published page, this new venture will always be a living work in progress, and I'm counting on our readers to help us shape it.

Until the new Saturday Opinion Extra page appears, please come to my blog to share your thoughts: thestate.com/bradsblog/. Or send us a letter at stateeditor@thestate.com.