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Union calls for investigation of ignored coroner's report, says CO firings based on testimony from death row inmates

COLUMBUS – The largest state employee union vowed today to vigorously fight yesterday's firings of two correctional officers at the Mansfield Correction Institution in connection with the suicide of an inmate on Death Row, saying that state prison officials acted with disregard to facts, staff interviews and the county coroner's finding of fact and verdict.

A leader of the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association vowed to return the two employees to work and also announced that the union is asking for the coroner to launch an investigation.

"They are railroading these officers," said OCSEA Director Andy Douglas. "The Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections is attempting to try and convict the accused corrections officers even though there is overwhelming and independent evidence that supports these workers.

"Despite written logs and the testimony of prison workers, DRC officials have wrongly accused these workers of failing to make mandatory inspections of the Death Row cells. The department's entire case revolves around their assertion that the inmate had been dead for four hours before he was found," said Douglas.

"What makes this case so outrageous is that prison officials apparently knew that the Richland County coroner had established the time of death to be approximately 5:30 a.m., roughly the same time that the inmate was found. DRC administrators chose to ignore the coroner, who has the final say under Ohio's laws, and based their findings on medical and scientific assertions by non-certified, non-professional staff," Douglas said.

Douglas also said he is outraged by DRC's reliance on inmate testimony. "The creators of the myth that these employees failed to do their job are inmates, Death Row inmates. They have zero credibility and have an interest in creating major problems for prison staff," said Douglas.

He said that prison officials have also failed to release additional log books that could exonerate the fired employees.

“This is a classic case of scapegoating,” said Douglas. “There are so many glaring management problems at Mansfield that they are desperate to shift the blame to those on the lowest rungs of the security system. How else can you explain why prison officials would be willing to say that the coroner, their staff and their log books are wrong – and the inmates are right? Prison officials have ignored repeated performance problems among supervisors and have ignored understaffing issues. On May 7, it blew up in their face.”

Douglas said the union would fight the firings through its grievance system, but also said it is asking for the coroner to conduct an investigation. “The coroner has the final say in these matters. His verdict is the law. Public officials cannot arbitrarily dismiss a coroner’s legal finding,” said Douglas. “We believe that if DRC is so confident that its evidence refutes the coroner report, they should be required to present it and be questioned on it. Therefore, we will be asking Coroner Ryckman to hold a special investigation and hearing on the matter.”

OCSEA represents approximately 550 employees at ManCI and more than 10,000 workers in the entire state prison system. Statewide, OCSEA represents 36,000 public workers.

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