



The Lake Region Law Enforcement Center houses the Lake Region Correctional Center and conducts 911 dispatch for Eddy County.

Local jail issued temporary closure order

By Allison Lindgren

The latest blow in the continuing saga for the troubled Lake Region Correctional Center (LRCC) struck hard when an unscheduled inspection was conducted on August 2. The inspection was triggered by the escape of Eddy County inmate Seth Suko on July 5th and the failure of the LRCC to discover the escape for over 30 hours. Inspectors from the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (ND DOCR) Director of Facility Operations, Don Redmann and Inspector Bob Werlinger inspected the facility on August 2, 2017. The previous inspection of the LRCC had been conducted in November 2016 and the facility was found to be compliant at that time.

As a result of the inspection, the DOCR has threatened the LRCC with closure based on a report that details numerous violations, including a lack of written policies and procedures, under trained staff and the need to address medical care within the facility.

The inspection team informed the LRCC that it was non-complaint with numerous standards. Most of the compliance issues could be addressed by reviewing and updating the policies and procedures to meet the 2017 standards, with proper documentation of compliance with their facility policies and training for staff. The DOCR Facility Standards were issued in January, 2017, and the report states it provided the LRCC adequate time to comply with the standards.

The report states, "It was clearly apparent that no effort was made to comply with the correctional facility standards since issuance in January of 2017 and there were no reports or records indicating compliance, or even any effort to comply, with the facility standards. Staff training and the supervision of staff was also

identified as a critical need. Overall, the most important critical need is the need to address the medical care within the facility."

The compliance tally showed that the LRCC was in Non-Compliance of Standards in 40 out of 108 Standards. One of the most glaring violations for the public included non-compliance regarding inmate count standards within the facility. The standard is that there must be a minimum of three formal counts within each 24-hour period, one of them must be completed outside a shift change and one must be a standing count. The LRCC does have a written policy and procedure but the recent Suko escape showed that the staff did not comply with the LRCC's policy and procedures. Therefore, Suko's absence was not noticed for well over a day.

The LRCC also couldn't provide a copy of its suicide prevention plan. At least one inmate's death, John W. Wilkie Jr., 42, was ruled a suicide when he was found dead in May, 2015 in a holding cell. An investigation found he ingested alcohol and a mixture of medications. His family maintains that officers were told that he was suicidal, but officers felt he didn't need medical treatment, so he was taken to the LRCC.

The LRCC doesn't require fire drills or have severe weather plans in place. The report also showed that staff do not know how to manually override the locking system in the event of a fire or power outage.

Inmates interviews revealed complaints to DOCR inspectors about access to medical services but they indicated that they felt safe and were treated with respect by staff.

In a statement to the Grand Forks Herald, Don Redmann, ND DOCR Director of Facility Operations said that it's rare for a facility in North Dakota to have this many violations or to come under threat of being closed. Another vis-

it is planned to review progress. "I believe and have faith that they're committed to (improving)," he said. "I know they are putting in significant effort based on conversations to date."

Leann Bertsch, Director of the ND DOCR, has issued an order for temporary closure

based on the findings of the inspection team. The closure notice states that "the extent of the LRCC's non-compliance with state law and North Dakota Correctional Facility Standards presents a danger to the health and safety of inmates, staff, law enforcement, visitors and the public, and justifies an order of temporary closure without an issuance of a prior order of non-compliance."

However, the notice also states that the order of temporary closure will be suspended if the LRCC complies with several requirements, including the immediate hiring of or contracting with a medical doctor to act as the Health Care Authority and submitting policies to the state that comply with standards.

Federal inmates have been removed, and the LRCC has until October 1 to fix many issues as outlined by the Temporary Order of Closure.

In an interview with KFGO radio's Tyler Axnes, LRCC Administrator Rob Johnson talked about the order for temporary closure and the progress the LRCC is making. He said the inspection results showed mostly policy issues. The most significant of what was witnessed by the inspection team is that the jail's nurse had recently resigned, which left the jail with no onsite medical care provided for the inmates for about a two-week time period. The nurse was still employed at the time of the inspection but they knew about her resignation. The facility would then be without medical care as a replacement had not been hired. The inspection report indicated that the facility was also without a nurse from November, 2016 through May, 2017.

They have since hired a doctor, to ensure that assessments are done as required by the standards, as well as to provide medical or sick call for the inmates if they are ill or have medical issues that they need to have

addressed.

Another big issue in the inspection report was the lack of experience of staff. There has been very high turnover over the last three years and the LRCC doesn't have a lot of experienced staff. Johnson said he "compare it to making copies of copies, and some where down the line the information gets distorted and it is not as good as it needs to be. So, we need to get back to getting our staff up to speed and making sure that they are successful in dealing with the population that we need to deal with."

Many of their policies need to be reviewed and updated and Johnson says that moving forward, those policies will be updated yearly, as the standards require. Johnson has been working for the last six months on making the transition to a service called Lexipol, a web based policy management system that is established for correctional facilities. Lexipol ensures that the facility is up to date on state laws and standards, federal laws and standards and best practices.

With this order by the DOCR, that process is being ramped up, as far as getting that put into place. Johnson says that it is then his intention to be reviewing them and then making revisions at least quarterly for the next few years, just to make sure that it fits the needs of the facility.

Johnson has been the director of the facility for the last thirteen months. When asked if the facility would be able to comply with the order before the October 1 deadline, Johnson responded, "We're going to be fine. Thankfully, to the doctor that we do have on staff now, and the hard work that she has provided us. The medical was our biggest concern."

The training of staff was something that we had already started to work on. A lot of things that we already had in place to be working on but now we just need to ramp it up and get them done faster than we were expecting. But we're going to be fine. As you indicated, I've been in this spot for 13 months.

There has been a lot of turmoil and transition over the last three years and I feel that we have made progress in the last year and this order shows just how far we have left to go. We're taking it as an opportunity to improve ourselves and to outline specifically what we've got to get done."

To wrap up the discussion, Johnson was asked if he had any additional comments. "We've had a lot of negative press and some of it, deservedly so," Johnson said. "I know that we need to gain the trust back from our communities and I want to assure everyone that we are doing everything we can and working as hard as we can, to make sure that we are providing the services for the communities we serve."