



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

115489

GENERAL GOVERNMENT
DIVISION

MAR 9 1981

B-133223

Mr. Norman A. Carlson
Director, Bureau of Prisons
Department of Justice



115489

Dear Mr. Carlson:

Subject: The Bureau of Prisons' Actions Since
The Danbury Fire (GGD-81-52)

In August 1978, a General Accounting Office (GAO) report on the Danbury Federal Correctional Institution's fatal fire of July 7, 1977, 1/ discussed fire safety improvements the Bureau had made or intended to make at Danbury and other Federal institutions to prevent recurrence. In assessing the status of the Bureau's efforts in this regard, we find that substantive progress has been made. The Bureau has spent more than \$3.7 million on major improvements; and individual institutions have spent additional, but unreported, amounts on smaller fire safety projects.

In April 1978, the Bureau issued specific guidelines for institutions to follow in making fire safety improvements to inmate housing. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Life Safety Code 101 was the basis for most requirements. The guidelines specified the types of materials approved for walls, partitions, and ceilings; locks, signs, and doors to be used at building exits; and required alarms and protection systems in all living areas.

The Bureau initially required that all improvements be completed by October 1, 1979, but this date was changed to March 31, 1980. Subsequently, the Bureau recognized that there had been confusion in interpreting fire safety requirements and that items previously reported as being complete were not. This confusion, coupled with limited funds, other demands on workers' time, and difficulty in obtaining materials, resulted in the revision of target completion dates to July 1980. Although a July 1980 status report indicated that some institutions had not yet completed the required improvements, the Bureau had still come a long way since 1977.

1/"The Danbury Prison Fire—What Happened? What Has Been Done to Prevent Recurrence?" (GGD-78-82, August 4, 1978).

(182670)

One item we especially noticed was the effort to involve local fire officials in institution safety programs. At all three institutions we visited, safety officers were routinely familiarizing local fire officials with their institutions' layouts and structural conditions and seeking assistance with special problems. We believe these efforts to augment the Bureau's safety program with outside expertise are extremely valuable.

We conducted our survey at Bureau headquarters; at its Northeast Regional Office; and at Bureau institutions in Danbury, Connecticut; Montgomery, Pennsylvania; and Alderson, West Virginia. Because the followup work we performed included a limited assessment of the Bureau's overall environmental health program, we also visited community program offices and facilities in Boston, Massachusetts; and Hartford, Connecticut; as well as State and local agencies involved in performing safety and sanitation inspections and developing related standards.

We are not planning to undertake a review of the Bureau's safety program at this time. However, we did note certain matters during our survey that we wanted to call to your attention.

- Institution safety officers could augment their technical knowledge by regularly taking advantage of outside expertise.
- Alternate safety officers are not being adequately trained.
- Trades supervisors are not kept abreast of safety standards and product innovations, are not instructed in the proper use of specialized equipment, and, for the most part, are not aware of many Bureau safety requirements.
- More could be done to remedy safety hazards in community facilities.

ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE TO SAFETY
OFFICERS COULD ENHANCE THE BUREAU'S
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

Institution safety officers are a major part of the Bureau's environmental health program. They are responsible for planning, organizing, and coordinating institution safety programs, which include accident prevention and control; safety education and promotion; accident investigation, analysis, and reporting; health and sanitation, including insect and rodent control; and fire prevention, training, and suppression. However, we found that the safety officers at the institutions we visited were unable to fully perform their duties, because they lacked the required technical knowledge and did not routinely take advantage of outside technical expertise needed to ensure compliance with Bureau safety requirements.

Safety officers advised us that they did not feel fully qualified to deal with all the technical safety and sanitation problems they face in their institutions. Bureau officials stated that safety officers have

for the most part a broad knowledge of safety and sanitation without much expertise in any particular area.

In an effort to assist safety officers and help identify and deal with technical problems, the Bureau contracts with two environmental health specialists. Headquarters officials believe these consultants are valuable to the Bureau program because they are knowledgeable and objective. The same officials added, however, that the amount the consultants can accomplish is restricted by the time they are available under Bureau contract, the large number of Bureau institutions, and the limits of the consultants' own expertise.

As an additional effort to assist safety officers, the Bureau has for several years encouraged outside participation in institution fire safety programs. After the 1977 Danbury fire, the Bureau reemphasized the need for institutions to involve local fire officials in their fire safety programs. But the Bureau has not encouraged outside participation in other environmental health areas.

Some safety officers and institution managers have on their own initiative brought in outside experts who have improved the conditions in those institutions. For example, in July 1980, the safety officer at Alderson informally invited a Food and Drug Administration inspector to survey food service operations at his institution. The safety officer told us that although the inspector was generally impressed with the kitchen operation, he suggested remedial and preventive changes that enhanced safety and sanitation conditions. The safety officer noted that many of the inspector's observations were highly technical and could only be made by a food service expert.

A regional official told us that he had obtained environmental health assistance from nearby Fort Lee when he was the warden at the Petersburg correctional institution. He requested the Army to investigate a possible problem with excessive heat in the utility tunnel. An expert-technician found no such problem, but he identified other potentially dangerous conditions, including pockets of gas and asbestos-lined pipes emitting dangerous particles into the air. Since the institution safety manager had lacked the expertise to identify these problems on his own, the Army technician assisted in developing a plan to deal with them.

Some safety officers hesitate to invite outside safety and sanitation officials into their institutions. These individuals feel that negative findings by an outside expert would reflect adversely on their ability or would not be well received by institution management. Furthermore, we were advised by some safety officials that some wardens would not be inclined to allow outsiders to inspect their facilities unless instructed to do so.

ALTERNATE SAFETY OFFICERS ARE NOT
RECEIVING SUFFICIENT TRAINING AND
EXPERIENCE

Bureau policy provides for alternate safety officers to relieve regular safety officers during their absence and suggests that alternates receive formal safety training. The importance of an alternate safety officer was graphically demonstrated during the 1977 Danbury fire. At that time the safety officer was on leave, and significant responsibility fell on his alternate's shoulders.

Each institution we visited had one or more alternates. They had not received sufficient safety training nor did they have the opportunity to function as safety officers. Management in all three institutions cited budget constraints and the demands of the alternates' regular jobs as the primary reasons for their lack of safety training and preparation.

A February 21, 1980, vacancy announcement at Danbury stated that the alternate safety officer would

- receive intensive on-the-job training,
- assist the safety officer in periods of heavy workload, and
- relieve the safety officer when he was on leave or away from the institution.

However, an individual who had been an alternate safety officer at Danbury for about 1 year told us that she had not received special training or job experience. She had not received safety-related materials and was unfamiliar with the current Bureau safety policy statement. She felt she was not qualified to replace the safety officer if needed. Danbury's other alternate had been in this position for only 1 month and, understandably, had yet to receive any training.

Alternates we spoke with at the other two institutions similarly questioned their ability to fill in for their safety officers. Two of Alderson's alternates, a plumbing foreman and a correctional officer, told us they had received no safety-related training or experience from the Bureau. Another alternate who worked in the control room at Allenwood also had not received any formal training or experience since assuming his collateral position. All three alternates had taken at least one safety-related course on their own time.

The concept of alternate safety officers is a good one, but only if the alternates are adequately trained and experienced. A thorough understanding of institution emergency safety procedures and basic knowledge in occupational safety, firefighting, and processing injury reports are needed.

During our survey, safety officers told us that they were assigned a range of collateral duties which detracted from time available to perform significant safety tasks. At all three institutions, for example, the safety officers were responsible for ordering, controlling, and distributing institution cleaning supplies. These officers advised us that these functions, plus the need to investigate and report on staff and inmate injuries, consumed a substantial amount of their time and detracted from more significant safety duties. If training were provided to alternate safety officers, perhaps they could share in the performance of these safety-related tasks.

TRADES FOREMEN NEED MORE
SAFETY TRAINING AND INFORMATION

Mechanical services department (trades) foremen are important to the success of the Bureau safety program. Both safety officers and wardens told us that much of the effectiveness of the safety program depends upon these individuals helping to ensure safe conditions in their work areas.

Although foremen must possess certain technical skills and knowledge to obtain their positions with the Bureau and receive some subsequent general safety training, they have not received much technical training after they are onboard. They have not been kept abreast of safety standards, product innovations, or the use of specialized equipment. Additionally, trades foremen are not informed of all specific safety regulations that apply to their work areas; furthermore, they are uncertain about what management's attitude regarding safety would be if production suffered.

Trades foremen need continued
technical training

Although most trades foremen at the institutions we visited had experience in their occupational specialties before joining the Bureau, they had received little technical training to keep abreast of safety standards, product innovations, and the use of specialized equipment. Some foremen believed the lack of adequate training increased the potential for injuries and reduced their confidence when supervising inmates.

Some of the trades foremen we spoke with expressed apprehension about using equipment or performing certain work details because of their lack of knowledge or training.

--At one institution, a foreman told us he felt uncomfortable giving inmate safety lectures because he had no guidance on current safety standards in his work specialty. He told us he was using old reference materials he received before joining the Bureau to prepare his lectures.

--Another foreman told us he lost over 1 month of work after being hit in the eye with a piece of metal from a split-rimmed

tire. He told us he did not get proper instruction in how to remove this type of tire until after he was injured.

—A trades foreman told us he thought his institution's lift platform was dangerous and should be taken out of service. Institution management told us it felt the platform was safe and the foreman's discomfort was related to his lack of training in using it.

Before February 1980, the Bureau had no formal training standards for its foremen but relied, instead, on institutions to use their own discretion in encouraging and/or providing training. At the 3 institutions, we examined a total of 35 trades foremen's training records for calendar years 1977, 1978, and 1979 to see the extent to which trades foremen had received safety or job specialty training. The highest number of trades foremen receiving job specialty or technical training in any of those 3 years was 13 (1977). The highest number receiving safety training was 10 (1977).

In February 1980, the Bureau issued Program Statement 3906.4 which required each supervisor of an inmate detail to complete an initial 8 hours of safety training and an additional 2 hours of refresher training yearly. The Bureau also incorporated the American Correctional Association's requirement for job specialty training into its program statement by requiring employees to complete 16 hours of job specialty training annually, after their probationary year. This training must either be related to the employees' occupational trade or to administrative, managerial or supervisory duties they regularly perform. A Bureau official told us he hopes that the increased Bureau monitoring of employee training will encourage institutions to try to meet the new standards. However, he noted that limited training and travel budgets will prohibit many institutions from complying with this training requirement.

Trades foremen told us they had requested training to improve their skills or increase their knowledge in their trades but that most requests were denied. Management cited severe budget restrictions on travel as the reason.

In an attempt to stay current, some trades foremen tried to obtain product manuals and advice from sales representatives on the proper and safe use of equipment. However, limited funds for purchasing reference materials and the unavailability of materials regarding old equipment have hindered these efforts.

Trades foremen are not informed
about safety regulations

At one institution we attempted to find out why safety hazards we had identified existed in some worksites. In many instances, trades foremen were not aware of specific Bureau safety regulations. For example:

- The electrical foreman was unaware that some of his tools had to be tested for dielectric strength every 6 months.
- The paint foreman was not aware of the Bureau standard that specified the pitch and extension on all ladders used on inmate details and required the use of safety shoes.
- The power plant foreman was unaware of Bureau standards regarding boiler service line valves.
- The garage foreman, construction foreman, and safety officer were unaware that over-the-road automotive equipment had to be inspected and certified safe at least every 6 months.

Even though Program Statement 1600.2 is the Bureau standard for safety, some trades foremen and department heads we spoke with at the three institutions said they had never seen the program statement. Instead they relied on their own knowledge, experience, and common sense to keep their work areas safe.

The Bureau has developed a supervisors' safety training course consisting of video tapes and written materials covering different general safety topics. Safety officers conduct the course through the education departments. All supervisors of inmates, including trades foremen, are required to participate. We viewed the video tapes and written material and attended a course session. Although the course adequately explains the Bureau's general guidelines for institutional safety, it only goes part way in making trades foremen aware of the technical standards required in their individual work areas.

Trades foremen are unclear about safety as a priority in their work

Our report on the 1977 Danbury fire noted that Bureau personnel were confused regarding the priority of fire safety and what to do during a fire. The Bureau had indicated it would correct this situation and would stress the importance of fire safety in its institutions.

We found that although Bureau personnel were now clear regarding the importance of fire safety, there was a similar situation regarding the Bureau's view of safety in the work area. Many trades foremen felt that they had to somehow balance safety considerations with the need to get a job done and were uncertain of their safety responsibilities when production was at stake. They felt management would support their refusal to do an obviously unsafe job or use a potentially hazardous piece of equipment. However, they often hesitate to use safety as a reason for not performing assigned work because they felt that production was the most important part of their job.

Foremen need to exercise
control over inmate laborers

We observed a number of occasions when inmates on work details were violating Bureau safety requirements, at times while under the direct supervision of Bureau staff. Inmates welded without protective gloves, mowed lawns with tractor deflector guards up or feet resting on steering wheels, handled cement blocks without protective shoes, worked construction without protective headgear, and drove heavy equipment without a proper operating license. We also noted two situations where inmates repeated violations within a couple days of being initially advised. We do not know whether these violations occurred because of inadequate supervision, training or disciplining of inmates, or a combination of these, but inmate labor is the major portion of institution workforce, and it is particularly important that the Bureau make inmates aware of good safety habits and enforce them.

The Bureau requires that recently arrived inmates be given a general orientation speech. Additionally, members of work details receive periodic safety talks presented by trades foremen. Foremen at one institution complained that they had received little direction as to the content of such talks and are not sure if they are conducting these sessions in a proper manner. Additionally, some foremen and other Bureau personnel questioned the practicality of what they could do to force inmates to follow safety requirements.

MORE COULD BE DONE TO ENSURE THAT
COMMUNITY-BASED FACILITIES ARE SAFE
AND SANITARY

Within the Bureau, Community Program Officers (CPOs) are responsible for inspecting community-based facilities to assure that they comply with Bureau requirements, including safety and sanitation. CPOs told us they did not have the training or technical knowledge to identify many environmental health deficiencies and that they have had to use common sense and personal criteria to evaluate safety and sanitation conditions.

To better prepare CPOs, the Bureau has designed a 1-week training course covering a variety of areas related to monitoring contracts with community facilities. We noted that a section of one training session deals with safety and sanitation, but, because the course was not scheduled to begin before January 1981, we were unable to comment on the merits of this training.

Bureau officials also believe that inspections by local fire, public health, building code, and licensing agencies can supplement Bureau efforts and help assure that community-based facilities are safe and sanitary. In that regard, the Bureau recently amended its contracts with community facilities to require at least a semiannual inspection by the local fire

department or fire marshal. Although no other inspections are required, they are encouraged.

The Bureau has not specified the standards to be followed in fire safety or any other inspections. In the two States we visited, local and State inspection agencies were not providing uniform coverage to such facilities. We found that fire safety inspections were generally conducted more frequently and routinely than other types of inspections related to environmental health. Moreover, we found that CPOs did not receive copies of inspection reports under any situation—the inspection reports are required to be on file at the facility. As pointed out in a prior GAO report, ^{1/} inspectional coverage and standards vary significantly among jurisdictions. This inconsistency heightens the need for standards that could be used to determine whether State or local agencies are adequately inspecting facilities. Additionally, CPOs should routinely receive inspection reports if the most effective use is to be made of them.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that opportunities exist to improve the safety and sanitation programs of the three institutions we visited. In this regard, we recommend that all alternates be fully trained and given the opportunity to gain on-the-job experience so they will be ready if it becomes necessary to call upon them in emergencies.

We also recommend that the Bureau improve the ability of trades foremen to contribute to the Bureau's safety program. The foremen need technical training in safety standards and the use of specialized equipment. Also, the Bureau should

- disseminate its program statement for safety to all those responsible for implementing it,
- clarify its position on safety in the workplace, and
- upgrade its efforts to monitor safety and sanitation conditions in contractor-operated community facilities by developing standards for inspections performed by State

^{1/}"The Department of Justice Can Do More To Help Improve Conditions at State And Local Correctional Facilities" (GGD-80-77, Sept. 15, 1980).

B-133223

and local agencies and requiring that the reports of such inspections be sent to CPOs.

- - - -

We thank you for the courtesies and cooperation extended to us during this survey. Please inform us of any actions taken on the recommendations contained in this letter.

Sincerely yours,

W. J. Anderson

William J. Anderson
Director