

## POLITICS

# Tennessee's corrections chief balks at more oversight: 'I know how to run the prisons'



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Department of Correction Commissioner Frank Strada opposes external oversight measures for Tennessee's state- and private-run prisons, but inmate and prison guard advocacy groups are pleading for an independent accountability system.

"I don't believe we need an oversight system to come in and tell us how we're doing," Strada said Wednesday during a rare meeting of the Tennessee Senate Corrections Subcommittee. "I've been doing this for 36 years. I think I know how to run the prisons."

Advocates from several groups representing prison guards called for a system of accountability outside the state corrections department — mirroring a federal model that conducts surprise inspections and manages grievances.

Calls for new oversight come as the U.S. Department of Justice is investigating violations at Trousdale Turner Correctional Center — a state prison run by publicly traded private operator CoreCivic — following years of scathing audits. Strada said Wednesday that he has not spoken to anyone at the DOJ regarding the Trousdale probe, but TDOC's legal team is accommodating their requests.

Strada bristled at the proposal of an independent review board.

Gov. Bill Lee appointed Strada to the post in January 2023 after a long tenure working in Arizona's prison system. But Strada came under scrutiny there, accused of having left the agency in "disarray," according to court documents. For months after Strada's departure, the Arizona agency was unable to conduct executions due to failures in previous leadership.

## **Strada defends existing system, CoreCivic fines**

Strada said TDOC's system of occasional comptroller audits, standards guidance from American Correctional Association, and internal compliance is working.

But reports persist of drugs being delivered by drone into Troupdale, inmates attacked by gang members, and loved ones getting weekly extortion demand calls from gang members that effectively control the facility from the inside. DOJ officials have identified 196 assaults, 90 cases of sexual misconduct, two murders and 15 "accidental" deaths during a 12 month span in 2022 and 2023.

On Monday, a food service worker and three officers at Troupdale were stabbed by an inmate with a contraband weapon and hospitalized.

"I believe external oversight is not warranted," Strada said Wednesday.

Instead, he described the state's work with CoreCivic as "very rewarding for the state," despite the contractor's routine failure to fulfill contract obligations. Since 2022, the state has assessed a total of \$29.6 million in fines to CoreCivic for contract violations across the four CoreCivic-run facilities, TDOC officials said at the hearing.

"When they're not meeting the contract, we fine them, and then they take corrective action," Strada said.

Despite millions of dollars in fines charged each year, CoreCivic has never yet completely fulfilled staffing obligations at Troupdale. But Strada says fines remain effective.

"I believe that the fines are a deterrent," Strada told The Tennessean after the hearing. "I mean, when you're taking \$29 million away from a company, I believe that is a deterrent, and it makes them try to fix the problems that we're identifying."

Tennessee previously had a Corrections Oversight Committee, created in 1985 and housed within the legislature, separate from the corrections department, but it was eliminated in 2011. Lawmakers considered reinstating the committee in 2016, but ultimately did not.

## **Advocates call for external review**

Advocates from prison officer groups led the call for external review to uphold standards and bolster inmate and staff safety in light of ongoing nationwide corrections staffing crisis.

“Tennessee, like many other states, is experiencing a critical staffing crisis that threatens the very mission of corrections and puts both the staff and the incarcerated in harm's way, along with the communities where these prisons are located,” said Andy Potter, founder of One Voice United, a group that represents corrections officers.

Staffing shortages put inmates and corrections officers and staff in danger.

“Understaffed prisons often see higher rates of violence,” said Mike Morel of the Federal Council of Prison Locals. “Inmate conflicts go unchecked, fights between inmates can escalate, and officers may not be able to intervene in time to prevent serious injuries, or even deaths.”

Advocates said that while sign-on bonuses can help fill vacancies temporarily, contrary to TDOC's view, more money is not a solution for long-term retention rates. Trousdale saw a 188% staff turnover rate in 2023, a comptroller audit found. Other states are exploring innovative programs to help with corrections officer retention, like employee support groups, and wellness programs to help officers cope with the stress and trauma integral to the work.

“While understaffing presents an immediate, invisible challenge, the deeper issue lies in the lack of effective oversight in the prison system,” Morel said. “Most prisons operate with relatively little external scrutiny, allowing systematic problems like understaffing medical neglect and unsafe conditions to persist unchecked.”

Matthew Charles, senior policy adviser with Families Against Mandatory minimums, said the \$29 million in fines Tennessee has charged to CoreCivic “shows that there’s a deficiency there that should have been corrected.” He also argued an oversight board is a fiscally responsible investment, noting TDOC’s \$1.3 billion budget.

“If you’re not getting the results that you expect from receiving \$1.3 billion, then there needs to be somebody saying ‘wait a minute, this needs to be done,’” Charles said. “The only way that’s going to be done is independent prison oversight.”

## **Lawmaker supports independent oversight**

Sen. Mark Pody, R-Lebanon, has requested more transparency from TDOC on several matters, and said the state should reinstate an independent review board.

“I think we should,” Pody told reporters after the hearing. “If I’m having difficulty finding information that I need to do this kind of investigation myself – and I’m on an oversight

committee. ... We might have to create one to have the authority.”

During the hearing, Pody tersely questioned corrections officials about a request he’s made multiple times for copies of inmates’ drug-related death reports. Documentation he’s received list self-injury, natural illness, and homicide, but no drug overdoses.

“I don’t think that’s a correct statement,” Pody said. “How would I find that information?”

“Are you telling me that I’ve got to do a public records request – as a state Senator from this office right now in order to get that information?” he asked as the hearing room collectively inhaled.

TDOC officials promised to share records. Pody also asked officials to provide the officer vacancy rates for both state-run and privately managed prisons, but TDOC officials Wednesday did not have CoreCivic's officer vacancy rate to compare with state-run prisons.

“It’s not that I’m doubting this commissioner,” Pody said. “But for the next commissioner and the next commissioner going forward, what’s the best scenario we can have? My goal would be to find guardrails for the long term.”

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