



NEWS RELEASE

From New York State Inspector General
Catherine Leahy Scott

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INVESTIGATION AND INSPECTIONS FINDS SUBSTANTIALLY ENHANCED PRISON SECURITY PROCEDURES FOLLOWING 2015 ESCAPE AND ISOLATED INCIDENTS OF STAFF CONTINUING TO NEGLECT DUTIES

ALBANY – New York State Inspector General Catherine Leahy Scott today released the report of prison facility inspections and an investigation triggered by allegations in 2017 of a Clinton Correctional Facility civilian female employee having an illicit relationship with and providing contraband to an inmate, similar to the actions that led to the 2015 escape of two convicted murderers from the facility. This investigation and inspections, in part ensuing from the Inspector General’s original investigation into the escape, found that Clinton and other prison facilities implemented significant reforms and substantial improvements since the escape, although some incidents reflecting security lapses were uncovered. The discovery of many of these issues stem from the implementation of the reforms recommended by the Inspector General following the 2015 escape.

“Since the 2015 escape of two inmates, leadership of the state prison system has accomplished dramatic reforms at Clinton Correctional Facility and enhanced operations statewide in close coordination with my office,” said **Inspector General Leahy Scott**. “Clearly, some employees or small units at individual facilities have not fully grasped the responsibilities required of them, and I will not, nor should anyone, tolerate security breaches or reports of prison employees neglecting their duties. However, I applaud the improvements that have been made and will continue working closely with DOCCS to help ensure an escape like the one in 2015 never happens again.”

In the wake of the Inspector General’s investigation and [report](#) of the 2015 escape of inmates David Sweat and Richard Matt from Clinton Correctional Facility, which found that complacency among staff and lax and deficient policies and supervision facilitated the escape, the Inspector General has worked closely with the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) to ensure that recommended corrective measures were implemented. During the ongoing monitoring of DOCCS facilities in 2017, a staff member at Clinton properly reported allegations to DOCCS’s internal affairs unit, the Office of Special Investigations, of a civilian tailor shop employee at Clinton. An investigation found that the tailor shop employee was involved in a romantic relationship with an inmate and smuggling contraband and cash into the prison for him. Subsequently, DOCCS referred the matter to the New York State Police and Inspector General Leahy Scott for further investigation. In late 2017, employee Denise Prell – who used a fictitious alias and a prepaid cellular phone to conceal her relationship – was arrested on numerous criminal charges related to her actions in the prison. She was also terminated from her position.

Prell, who was prosecuted by the Clinton County District Attorney’s Office, pleaded guilty in Clinton County Court on August 28, 2018 to Promoting Prison Contraband in the Second Degree, 23 counts of Official Misconduct, and one count of Sexual Abuse in the Third Degree, all misdemeanors. She was released pending sentencing scheduled for Nov. 13, 2018.

Notably, former Clinton Correctional tailor shop employee Joyce Mitchell was arrested and convicted in 2015 for having intimate relationships with Sweat and Matt and providing them with the tools and resources they used to escape from the prison. Her actions, as well as the actions of certain correction officers and lax oversight of the facility, were all among the issues blamed for the escape.

“Joyce Mitchell’s abhorrent and notorious actions compromised the safety and security of the North Country and brought to light the meaningful reforms necessary. The fact that another similarly situated employee engaged in much of the same sorts of conduct seems unfathomable and reminds us of the need for continued diligence in implementing the new security measures,” said **Inspector General Leahy Scott**.

Since the escape, upon Inspector General Leahy Scott’s recommendations, DOCCS has implemented the following reforms, among others:

- New electronic monitors were installed in catwalks behind inmate cells and inspections of the areas are registered;
- new electronic systems ensure bed checks and overnight rounds of the cells are completed by correction officers;
- correction officers now use thermal detection equipment to detect and confirm an inmate is in their bed during overnight checks;
- motion detectors and new steel gates have been installed through the basement tunnels under the prison, and inspections are performed monthly;
- prison staff must now use clear plastic bags when entering the facility with personal property and food, and are subject to more rigorous random metal detector screenings;
- inmates must now pass through a metal detector when leaving their work stations in prison tailor shops and may no longer travel between shops unescorted;
- all cells are now inspected at least once every 60 days, including integrity checks of the cells’ walls, bars, sinks and toilets.

In an effort to monitor these significant upgrades and reforms, the Inspector General in conjunction with DOCCS conduct unannounced inspections of Clinton and other facilities. These unannounced inspections have uncovered evidence that certain correction officers assigned to overnight duties were shirking their responsibilities. As found in the post-escape investigation, night shift officers with virtually no responsibilities other than performing counts and ensuring that inmates are alive and well in their cells had failed to do so.

An unannounced inspection of Clinton Correctional in late 2017 by the Inspector General and DOCCS found mattresses, pillows, blankets, alarm clocks, reclining chairs, and cable-enabled televisions in lockers used by correction officers and within areas utilized by correction officers in inmate blocks. Subsequent inspections by DOCCS of employees arriving for duty, their lockers at the facility and officer areas, found additional contraband including television sets, pornographic magazines, e-cigarettes, pillows and even a hammock. Disciplinary actions were filed related to those findings.

A near simultaneous DOCCS inspection at Upstate Correction Facility in Malone, prompted by the Inspector General’s inspection at Clinton Correctional, found mattresses, sheets, blankets, alarm clocks and a fan in a basement area under the infirmary. A review of video monitoring equipment found three correction officers and a sergeant spending hours at a time during the overnight shift in that basement area and in the infirmary. Subsequent questioning of those employees by the Inspector General included admissions of “dozing off” and a claim by one officer of reading books while in the basement area but unable to remember the name of any recent book he had read. As a result of the inspection, DOCCS reported it suspended without pay and filed disciplinary actions against seven employees, including four who neglected their duties by spending hours at a time in the infirmary or in the basement area beneath the infirmary.

An additional unannounced inspection by DOCCS and the Inspector General at Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills found various contraband items and areas utilized by staff in significant disarray. Disciplinary matters are pending against employees there.

More recently, an unannounced inspection of Wende Correctional Facility, located in Alden, found employees in possession of contraband items, including three pocket knives with blades slightly longer than those permitted under DOCCS policy, a corkscrew, and a cigar cutter. DOCCS subsequently pursued disciplinary action. The inspection also found the administration of the facility to be responsive to the searchers and compliant with requests, and the employee locker rooms to be clean and orderly. Of note, periodic searches by administration of employee lockers at the facility likely contributed to the orderliness of the locker rooms and the low incidence of contraband found there.

Given the similarities between former Clinton Correctional tailor shop employee Joyce Mitchell's actions assisting the 2015 escape, and subsequent actions by former Clinton Correctional tailor shop employee Denise Prell, Inspector General Leahy Scott reiterated her recommendation that all civilian staff receive mandatory core training, including training on recognizing and reporting inmate manipulation, prior to commencing employment. The Inspector General also recommends DOCCS increase its minimum staffing at the Clinton Correctional tailor shop and remove unused barriers that obstruct lines of sight throughout the shop.

DOCCS has accepted and agreed to implement all of the Inspector General's recommendations.

Inspector General Leahy Scott thanked the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision for its assistance on the investigation and inspections, the New York State Police for its work on the investigation and arrest of Denise Prell, and Clinton County District Attorney Andrew J. Wiley and his office for prosecuting Prell.

A copy of the report is available [HERE](#).

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