

Idaho State Police chief, Senate panel talk prison scandal

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The head of the Idaho State Police stood by his decision not to investigate a private prison company when he was questioned by lawmakers during a reappointment hearing Monday.

Idaho State Police Col. Ralph Powell told the Senate Judiciary and Rules Committee that he believed falsified reports given to the state by Corrections Corporation of America were likely a civil, not criminal, matter. Powell said that's why he decided not to launch a criminal investigation after it was revealed that CCA understaffed the state prison in violation of its contract.

"Whether or not this fraud piece was real, well certainly it was, (but) there wasn't a walk away from any criminal investigation agreement," Powell said. "There was an implication in other media that for some reason that I listened to this investigation request without consulting my experts in criminal investigations." That's "so far from factual," he said.

Powell added that the law enforcement agency doesn't launch criminal investigations on timecard errors. However, he said that the agency now realizes that problem went much deeper.

Instead, a forensic auditing firm, KPMG, was hired to review timesheets. The firm found that CCA left more than 26,000 hours of mandatory guard posts unstaffed or insufficiently covered in 2012. KPMG also recommended the state expand its CCA staffing investigation.

The FBI is now investigating CCA over the company's running of an Idaho prison that had a reputation so violent that inmates dubbed it "Gladiator School."

Powell was before the committee for his reappointment hearing. The panel asked Powell a total of three questions, only one regarding the private prison scandal, and no follow-up questions. Lawmakers will vote soon on whether to recommend the Senate should appoint Powell to the four-year term.

Nashville, Tenn.-based CCA operated Idaho's largest prison for more than a decade, but in 2013, CCA officials acknowledged it had violated the state contract by understaffing the Boise's Idaho Correctional Center and having employees falsify documents to cover up the vacancies. The announcement came after an Associated Press investigation showed CCA sometimes listed guards as working 48 hours straight to meet minimum staffing requirements.

The state has since taken over management of the prison.