

Balla ruling does not reflect work of current IDOC staff

By Kevin H. Kempf, Director, Idaho Department of Correction
August 13, 2014

When I was appointed director of the Idaho Department of Correction nine months ago, I hoped we could soon bring to an end the Balla case — the 34-year-old class action lawsuit by inmates over the quality of healthcare at Idaho State Correctional Institution. But U.S. District Judge David O. Carter’s recent decision to extend the court’s oversight of the facility till September 2017 means we have more work to do.

As we go forward, please know this: The actions that Judge Carter ruled IDOC took with “improper purpose” occurred in **2011 and 2012**. We now have new people and new policies in place. In fact, Judge Carter and even the inmates’ attorneys acknowledge the department has made progress over the past three years.

Here are just a few things we have done:

- IDOC administrators and healthcare professionals now meet monthly with the inmates who represent the Balla class and their attorneys to address healthcare-related issues at the facility and provide an open forum to identify and resolve concerns.
- IDOC has assigned two registered nurses, one full time and another part time, to audit the healthcare practices at the facility and ensure compliance with national standards for inmate healthcare. The nurses also meet with inmates to assure that medical staff is addressing their concerns.
- IDOC has added a full-time clinical supervisor at ISCI to oversee mental health staff and ensure consistent and sound mental health treatment is provided to all inmates. An additional clinical supervisor audits the facility to ensure compliance with national standards.
- IDOC has expanded the pharmacy at ISCI to make the delivery of medication to inmates more efficient and to decrease the amount of time inmates spend waiting in line. We built a new building at ISCI to accomplish this.

Over the past nine months, IDOC has made a renewed commitment to being open and transparent. As proof, we invited the ACLU to see how we operate our most restrictive housing units at our two highest-security prison — Idaho Maximum Security Institution and Idaho State Correctional Center. The day-long tour included a visit to IMSI’s death row.

We also invited the ACLU to attend the department’s recent annual strategic planning meeting. Our message: We want to work with our critics instead of continuing to wage expensive legal battles against them in court.

We have also sent letters to all 105 state senators and representatives giving them 24/7 access to all of our prisons, reentry centers and probation and parole offices. The lawmakers do not need to

tell us they're coming. They can stop by any time and we will show them anything they wish to see.

Why are we doing this? Because we have nothing to hide. Because we want our elected officials to see with their own eyes how we are spending taxpayer dollars.

I am disappointed of course that the Balla case will now continue for at least another two years, but I remain determined to bring it to a close. To do so, we will need to work closely with lawmakers, inmates and the organizations that represent them. We must prove to them through our actions that we are worthy of their trust.

That will take time. I am hopeful the recent court ruling does not overshadow the sincere efforts of the many dedicated correctional professionals who have made so much progress over the past three years to finally put Balla to rest.