

New Idaho director of Correction to further prison reforms

By RUTH BROWN, Idaho Press-Tribune



BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Amid a two-year flurry of prison reform in Idaho, Henry Atencio faces the challenge of maintaining that momentum within the Idaho Department of Correction.

In December, Atencio was named the Department of Correction's new director, succeeding former director Kevin Kempf, who during his tenure oversaw a whirlwind of reform.

Kempf left the department to take a new position as the executive director of the Association of State Correctional Administrators, reported the Idaho Press-Tribune (<http://bit.ly/2hwA3lr>). His two years as director have been marked by dramatic changes in Idaho's correctional system, from reductions in the use of solitary confinement to changes in prison standards and releasing hundreds of non-violent offenders into parole programs as part of the state's Justice Reinvestment Act.

The reforms began when Idaho dropped its private prison contractor, Corrections Corporation of America, amid a slew of allegations around staffing and poor prison standards that led inmates at the Idaho Correctional Center, the state's largest prison, to call it "Gladiator School."

Around the same time, in 2014, the state passed the Justice Reinvestment Act, which sought to reduce the non-violent offender population and change programming within the prisons.

When Kempf took the reins after former IDOC director Brent Reinke resigned, he took the challenge head-on, promoting transparency and humanizing the treatment of inmates while acknowledging the system is far from perfect.

Filling Kempf's shoes and continuing the reforms may seem like a tall order, but it's one that Kempf's successor appears well-positioned to tackle.

Atencio has been with the Department of Correction for the past 26 years and has been Kempf's right-hand man for the past two years of transformation. Kempf recommended Atencio to replace him to the Board of Correction, whose members took just two days to announce Atencio's appointment after Kempf turned in his notice.

Atencio, of Nampa, has spent more than two decades with IDOC in roles ranging from probation and parole, to deputy warden and most recently deputy director.

"It's very clear to me that we are on the right path as an agency, and we're headed in the right direction," Atencio told the Idaho Press-Tribune. "My goal as director is to maintain that and build upon that momentum that we have today. We have to finish those projects and keep them in our system. It's simply the right thing to do."

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

When referring to the "right thing to do," Atencio said he plans to move forward with IDOC's goal of phasing out the extended use of solitary confinement, or administrative segregation.

In restrictive housing, commonly called solitary confinement, inmates are alone for 23 hours a day. Even when they leave their cells, inmates are handcuffed and escorted by guards.

Kempf and IDOC wardens have repeatedly said they support the idea of phasing out long-term restrictive housing based on the morality of inmate treatment.

Advocates of eliminating solitary confinement argue the approach is inhumane, something Kempf has openly acknowledged.

Two years ago, IDOC had around 300 restrictive housing cells. As of late December, the number had dropped to 182 cells.

As an agency, Atencio said he supports the use of research-based change when selecting appropriate offender treatment.

"I think as an industry we're getting smarter about what we do, so we're going to be changing for sure," Atencio said. "Restrictive housing reform is great example of that. (We're) relying on research and evidence-based practices in terms of what kind of programming we offer an inmate population or probation community."

Atencio said he plans to move forward with the plan to phase out and change the use of long-term restrictive housing and meet the department's goal of having a reform plan in place by July.

DIFFERENT STYLES

Throughout his career, the paths of Atencio and Kempf crossed more than once.

Prior to being appointed director in 2014, Kempf previously served as a section supervisor and was hired by Atencio, who was then district manager of the Division of Probation and Parole in Boise. Kempf later became chief of probation and parole and hired Atencio.

As the two men climbed the administrative ranks together, the two leaders with very different styles got to know each other well.

Kempf is known for speaking passionately about correctional change, sometimes comparing the treatment of inmates to how he would want his own children to be treated. His bold statements have encouraged lawmakers and the public to view felons as humans, rather than corralled animals. Walking through prison grounds, Kempf didn't hesitate to talk with inmates directly, calling out to them with a "Hey, fellas," as he approached and spoke candidly about the prison.

Atencio, meanwhile, is known for focusing on how to keep offenders on the right track after release, keeping the best interest of his staffers in mind and paying attention to detail. Those are traits and skills that could prove essential to run an

agency that employs nearly 2,000 people and is responsible for the incarceration and community supervision of 22,000 felony offenders.

As director, Atencio will oversee IDOC's \$220 million budget and operations, including its nine prisons, four community re-entry centers and seven probation and parole districts. A Parma native and Boise State University graduate, Atencio faces Senate confirmation during the upcoming legislative session, which begins on Jan. 9. His salary as director will be about \$150,000 per year.

In a calm and composed tone, Atencio acknowledges the issues offenders face, such as trauma commonly suffered by female inmates and challenges parolees struggle with when attempting to change their lifestyle and criminal thinking on the outside.

"I wish I was like that," Kempf said about Atencio's skills and attention to detail. "I need people like Henry around me. I just think those attributes are going to serve him well."

Both men speak openly about the need for transparency and focusing on IDOC's responsibility to keep the community safe.

"I've always felt like Henry would be a better director than me," Kempf said. "There are things he and I see eye-to-eye on, like a tremendous love for our staff."

Kempf said that while their personalities differ, he needed people like Atencio around him while serving as director.

"Henry is smart with very calculated decision making," Kempf said.

JUSTICE REINVESTMENT

The Justice Reinvestment Initiative, implemented by the Legislature in 2014, is an ongoing effort by IDOC to reduce prison population by releasing non-violent offenders to community treatment programs and increasing the supervision of dangerous offenders.

Atencio said one of his goals as director will be improving offender re-entry.

"I want to bridge the gap between prison and the community," he said. "It's a soft spot for us and we want to focus our efforts on making that transition for an inmate who's walking out onto parole and when he sees his parole officer."

While efforts to reduce inmate population have been successful, there is an ongoing concern about potential recidivism or parole violations leading those newly released offenders back to county jail.

Atencio said IDOC measures recidivism after an offender has been out for three years, so it is still too early to determine whether there has been success. Because Justice Reinvestment was a significant policy adjustment, he expects more change as the initiative is implemented.

He said the best way to stop that recidivism is involving the offender in treatment and connection with their parole officers as well as maintaining protective factors.

Protective factors would include an offender who has family stability, is employed and has pro-social friendships.

Another goal on Atencio's list is finishing IDOC's policy on the Prison Rape Elimination Act, the federal mandate to protect inmates from sexual assault that states are trying to implement in their prison systems. IDOC plans to outline a policy, Atencio said.

PRAISE FOR ATENCIO

Sandy Jones, executive director of the Idaho Commission of Pardons and Parole, worked with Atencio as Justice Reinvestment was implemented, saying he has continued to play a role in the process.

"I think he is going to be a fantastic director," she said.

Jones called Atencio the "obvious choice" for Kempf's replacement, noting that while the two are different personalities, Atencio is a steady and experienced member of IDOC.

"You won't find someone that says a bad word about him," Jones said. "He's been in corrections for 20 years."

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