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Ex-CCA official: Puryear misled clients

Versions for public allegedly whitewashed prison incidents

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A former Corrections Corporation of America manager is accusing the company's general counsel and federal judicial nominee Gus Puryear IV of overseeing a practice that produced misleading reports about safety incidents at its prisons.

Ronald T. Jones, who until last year worked as a senior manager in quality assurance at the Nashville-based prison operator, said that Puryear directed him and other staff to classify incidents such as escapes, unnatural deaths and disturbances as less serious to make its performance look better in reports to government agency clients. Reports prepared for internal use, meanwhile, included more details about the specific incidents, Jones said.

Time Magazine also reported Jones' allegations on its Web site on Thursday.

Private Corrections Institute, an advocacy group that opposes prison privatization and has been an outspoken critic of Puryear's nomination, Thursday urged the Senate Judiciary Committee to hold another round of hearings at which Jones could testify and Puryear be asked more questions about his actions.

"Alternatively, we support the position of not bringing Mr. Puryear's judicial nomination forward for a committee vote," said Alex Friedmann, a former inmate at a CCA prison and the group's vice president.

At a Feb. 12 hearing before the Judiciary Committee, Puryear faced tough questions on the 2004 death of a woman at the Metro Detention Facility, possible conflict of interest with cases involving CCA and its executives that are often filed in Middle Tennessee District, where he would serve, and his membership in the exclusive Belle Meade Country Club.

In response, Puryear said that he would recuse himself for at least five years from all cases involving CCA and its executives: said there were disagreements among medical experts about what happened in the death of Estelle Richardson at the detention facility; and promised to resign from Belle Meade if he found its membership policies violated the code of judicial ethics. Committee staff said any action on Puryear's nomination is unlikely until April at the earliest. The committee has no more business meetings this week and Congress is on Easter break for the next two weeks.

The Judiciary Committee usually does not hold additional hearings with the nominee and other witnesses. Instead, the senators rely on written responses to questions and the transcript of the original hearing when discussing and voting on a nominee. Puryear couldn't be reached last night for comment.

CCA denies allegations

Louise Grant, a CCA spokeswoman, called Jones' allegations inaccurate and added that it paints a false picture of CCA's quality assurance process and of Puryear's role. "We question the motives of this former employee, who was not in a leadership position in quality assurance and resigned in lieu of termination," Grant added. "If our interest was in under-reporting or not finding quality issues, we simply would not have created this (quality assurance) department or its programs in the first place."

Jones denies that he faced termination at CCA. He now lives in Detroit and said he left CCA to pursue a legal career. He said in his job he was responsible for tracking information on events such as unusual deaths, disturbances and audit findings and that the misleading practices began in early 2005, when the quality assurance department was put under Puryear as general counsel.

A CCA staff member in 2005 provided a report containing potentially damaging information about an incident at a prison to a government client without corporate approval, Jones said. That incident, according to Jones, led to a new policy in which any reports that could be made public needed to be cleared by the office of the general counsel.

"Mr. Puryear then directed me, and other quality assurance department staff who process audit report finding, to create two reports for distribution of audit findings," Jones wrote in a statement sent to the Senate Judiciary Committee. "I would prepare one report with all of the audit findings and auditor comments in it for "internal purposes only" and a separate more generic report that contained only general information about audit results as a whole."

In a separate interview with *The Tennessean*, Jones added that the more information that could potentially damage the company if it was released publicly, the more that its operations and financial status could be affected.

In the corrections industry, the number of incidents such as prison escapes, riots, and sexual assaults are among variables often used to determine bonuses for employees from wardens to chief executives, industry observers said. If a prison contract provides for a bonus, such incidents also would be taken into account by a client government agency in determining the award.

CCA is required to file reports with the state on incidents such as inmate-on-inmate assaults or inmate-on-staff assaults, disturbances and a daily census of inmates at its prisons that house state inmates, said Dorinda Carter, a spokeswoman for the Tennessee Department of Corrections. The department has onsite contract monitors and other designated employees at the prisons that report daily on incidents and another division that conducts annual audits of the CCA prisons, she said.

"We feel pretty sure that we're finding out about incidents as they happen," Carter said. She added that CCA is required to follow the same policies as the 13 prisons run by the state and that officials are confident in their monitoring of the company.

President Bush nominated Puryear last June to serve as a federal judge for the Middle District of Tennessee.