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Date: April 15, 2016
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MDOC Commissioner Responds to Counties about Regional Jails

JACKSON – Corrections Commissioner Marshall Fisher, responding to county officials’ remarks about the loss of inmates at regional jails, said MDOC is not responsible for the affected counties’ financial predicament.

“Those citizens may want to question the wisdom of the officials in their respective counties who based budgets on inmate populations that cannot always be guaranteed,” Fisher said. “While I sympathize with the citizens of the affected counties, the Mississippi Department of Corrections cannot continue to pay counties above contract requirements when it has space to house the inmates. I have an agency to run. Public safety is paramount to MDOC’s mission, not subsidizing counties’ budgets.”

On Feb. 5, the department announced that because of budget constraints, state inmate populations at county regional jails were being reduced to the contractual amount of 80 percent capacity. Also, MDOC had notified wardens at the regional jails that inmates would be moved. More than 600 inmates were shifted from regionals to the state’s three prisons.

MDOC’s 2016 budget was \$23 million less than the Legislative Budget Office recommendation. Additionally, in January, the budget was cut an additional 1.5% (roughly \$5 million) for the remainder of FY 2016.

“MDOC’s 2017 budget request does not include an increase in funding,” Fisher said. “We don’t know what our final budget numbers are going to be at this time. We are aware that revenue is down and that the Legislature has the unenviable job of determining the funding level for all state agencies.”

Fisher said those supporting the counties are spreading misinformation. “None of the inmates were pulled from the regionals and sent to private prisons,” Fisher said. “MDOC also has not offered to pay off a sheriff’s bond and close the county facility, as reported. However, closing a regional is not out of the question.”

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Fisher also questions why a letter, dated April 6, 2016, from the Mississippi Association of Supervisors was apparently provided to the media days before he received it this week. “Facts and figures in the letter are manipulated and private prisons are maligned,” Fisher said. “MDOC is encouraged in this letter to ignore the fact that our debt service in this state is nearly \$200 million for the private facilities, another problem I inherited.”

Fisher, who is in his second year as commissioner, said MDOC is in a new era. “Everyone should know by now the circumstances under which Gov. (Phil) Bryant appointed me,” he said. “Situations that currently exist and existed before my arrival were not created by me. As I have previously stated, I am not bound by decisions made via a wink and a nod.”

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