

MINUTES

**SENATE & HOUSE INTERIM COMMITTEES ON
STATE AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS; JOINT PERFORMANCE REVIEW
COMMITTEE; CHARITABLE, PENAL AND CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE ARKANSAS LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
Meeting Jointly**

August 27, 2013

The Senate and House Interim Committees on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs; Joint Performance Review Committee; and Charitable, Penal and Correctional Institutions Subcommittee of the Arkansas Legislative Council met jointly on Tuesday, August 27, 2013 at 8:30 AM at the Arkansas Department of Community Correction (DCC), Ouachita River Unit in Malvern.

Members in Attendance

The following committee members attended: Senators Eddie Joe Williams, Chair; Stephanie Flowers, Chair; Jane English, Chair; and Jimmy Hickey. Representatives Nate Bell, Douglas House, Mary “Prissy” Hickerson, Homer Lenderman, Mark Lowery, and Josh Miller.

Other members attending were: Representatives David Kizzia and Jeff Wardlaw.

Senator Williams called the meeting to order.

Arkansas Parole Board (APB) – Review Letter to Arkansas Sheriffs and Chiefs of Police; Observe Parole Hearing; and Tour Ouachita River Unit (ORU) [EXHIBIT C & HANDOUT 1]

John Felts, Chairman, APB, referred to Exhibit C and stated, the letter informs Arkansas sheriffs and police chiefs as of August 16, 2013, and by Act 1029; any parolee committing a new violent or sexual offense shall be held in a county facility until a hearing is conducted. Accessing Arkansas Crime Information Centers’ Victim Information and Notification Everyday database is the most efficient way to determine if an arrestee is on parole. Efforts are in place to change the white warrant issuing process from physical to electronic notifications. In response to a question by Senator Flowers, Mr. Felts explained, in the past, some jails allowed newly arrested parolees to place bond. Senator Hickey asked Mr. Felts to provide a list of jails that took part in that practice.

Mr. Felts stated ORU houses the largest percentage of sex offenders in Arkansas. ORU is the only in-state male facility that administers the Reduction in Sexual Victimization Program, which takes about one year to complete.

APB conducts parole hearings at ORU on a monthly basis. In the hearings, one APB member interviews an inmate who has served time up to, or at least six months from, his transfer-eligibility date. The APB member and inmate discuss the inmate’s reason for incarceration, program completion(s), parole plan, and hear advocates for or against his parole. After the hearing, the APB interviewer reports to other board members, where a three-out-of-five vote grants or denies the inmate’s parole. APB has an option to require programming for non-violent offenders, extending beyond the inmate’s transfer-eligibility date. In these cases, ORU must release the inmate to DCC upon program completion.

The committees recessed to observe parole hearings; tour the Ouachita River Unit; and travel to the Omega Technical Violator Center (Omega).

Overview and Tour of the Omega Technical Violator Center
[EXHIBIT D, ATTACHMENT 1, HANDOUTS 2 & 3]

Mr. Rick Hart, Deputy Director, Residential Services, DCC; Ms. Kathy Brown, Center Supervisor, Omega; Major Robert Wiley, Lieutenant Walter White, and Macy Bishop presented a PowerPoint

(Attachment 1) and explained, Omega's inmates are a diverse group of repeat offenders. The Center's average inmate population is 280; and nearly 100% have substance abuse and addiction issues.

Inmate treatment at Omega focuses on teaching, promoting, and encouraging positive cognitive and behavioral changes; placing specific emphasis on avoiding addiction and criminal lifestyles. New Freedom Curriculum is an important residential treatment program administered to Omega's inmates; that targets substance abuse, anger management, relationships, cognitive training, job readiness, life skills and re-entry. Inmates without high school diplomas (or equivalent) must attend General Equivalency Diploma (GED) class every day. Since Omega opened in 2005, 169 of its inmates have successfully completed the GED program. Faith-based programs play key roles in inmate rehabilitation and recovery at Omega.

Mr. Hart explained, safety at Omega is critical, and assaults of any kind are extremely rare. During its existence, the center's incident reports include only three assaults and one escape. He noted Omega's correctional professionals undergo extensive and continuing education programs to maintain a safe environment.

With no further business, the committees adjourned at 12:45 PM and toured Omega.