

PRISON RAPE ELIMINATION ACT HEARING
SEPTEMBER 11TH, 2008
OPENING STATEMENT

Hello, my name is Jeremy Tolson, I am the Warden of the Southeastern Ohio Regional Jail located in Nelsonville Ohio. I would like to take a brief moment to thank the members of the panel for allowing me the opportunity to take part in this hearing. I am honored to contribute to this worthy process, despite receiving disappointing results from the sexual victimization survey.

The Southeastern Ohio Regional Jail opened in 1998, where it now serves five Ohio counties. These five counties are considered “member counties”, and all other counties utilizing our facility are considered “contract counties. Since its inception, our facility has been the home of multiple administrators, employing four different Wardens prior to my tenure. Mr. Jeff Gillespie was the longest serving Warden, employed from 2003 to 2007. The Jails original capacity was 196 inmates (172 male and 24 female), although in 2001 the jail was approved to add an additional 24 male beds, increasing our rated capacity to 218. The Corrections Commission of SE Ohio is the governing body of our facility, consisting of 15 elected officials. Member counties are permitted equal representation on the Commission, which includes the Sheriff, and a Common Pleas Court Judge from each County.

I began my employment with the Jail when it first opened in 1998. I started as a Corrections Officer, and have since been promoted up through the ranks of Sergeant, Lieutenant, Deputy Warden, and in May of 2007 I was offered and accepted the position of Warden. The sexual victimization survey was conducted at our facility shortly after my promotion, and the results quite surprising. Although it is my opinion that at the time of the survey the Jail’s policies relating to PREA were insufficient, I do believe that the philosophy of the facility is solid, which is to have a zero tolerance towards prison rape or any other criminal act. Initially, I had concerns that Inmates misrepresented our facility as retribution for their incarceration, but after studying the survey, I came to the conclusion that it did not matter. I decided to take the opportunity to ensure any and all deficiencies related to PREA were alleviated.

After the release of the survey, we immediately began fixing our target problem areas. One initiative included the addition of a full-time Administrative Assistant/Investigator. This action eliminated multiple investigating officials, and centralized all internal complaints and incidents, creating a far more efficient investigating process. Additionally, we have developed and implemented a crime tip hotline for the inmates to utilize when reporting a crime such as sexual assault. Access to this line is secure and it ensures confidentiality and integrity. With regard to the survey, I noticed a discrepancy between the amounts of alleged incidents versus the actual documented incidents that we have on file. The crime tip hotline is a method that the inmates have to report incidents without concern of retribution from staff. We're also in the process of developing and implementing new policies relating to PREA. For instance, we are incorporating PREA training in our annual in-service training for all staff. These are just some of the initial issues that we are in the process of improving. I am confident that our efforts will greatly reduce the percentage of alleged or actual incidents of sexual victimization.

Thanks again for allowing my staff and I to participate in this hearing, we are happy to assist in developing appropriate PREA standards.

This concludes my opening statement.

Jeremy Tolson
Warden