

Girl's death is blamed on senior BIA officials

(AP) - Senior Bureau of Indian Affairs officials ignored warnings that jail cells at American Indian boarding schools could prove lethal, and should be held responsible for the death of a 16-year-old girl at an Oregon school last year, a federal inspector testified.

Earl Devaney, the Interior Department's inspector general, told the Senate Finance Committee last week that the Department of Justice should take action against senior Indian Affairs officials for the death of Cindy Gilbert Sohapp, who

died after she was incarcerated while under the influence of alcohol.

"There were senior people in the BIA who knew about this years before," Devaney said.

According to federal records, on the night of Dec. 6, Sohapp was placed in one of the Chemawa Indian School's holding cells after staff found her to be intoxicated. A dormitory worker stationed outside the cells was supposed to check on her every 15 minutes but did not.

The worker finally checked

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on Sohapp about three hours after she had been placed in the cell and discovered that she was not breathing. She was declared dead a few minutes later.

Bill Williams, an assistant U.S. attorney in Oregon, declined in

June to prosecute school staff members, saying he lacked evidence of a crime.

Devaney said after Tuesday's hearing that he would be looking beyond staff members and focusing on school and national administrators.

He said the bureau's law enforcement and education divisions were blaming each other for the death.

Sohapp's case was one of 11 deaths, 236 suicide attempts and 631 escapes documented in Devaney's report to the committee. The report condemned the

BIA's operation of 72 detention facilities as a "liability time bomb" and compared conditions to those found in Third World jails.

Dave Anderson, the head of the BIA, and about 40 federal staffers and two tribal leaders attended the hearing.

Anderson defended the staff of the bureau he was appointed to head shortly after Cindy Sohapp's death.

"I want to make sure we don't paint a portrayal of them as all inefficient, bad people," he said.

For as much knowledge as bureau officials had about Chemawa, Devaney said, oversight was lax for facilities the bureau funded, owned or staffed.

He said that top bureau law enforcement officials were surprised to learn of 98 percent of the incidents cited in his report.

In the past three years, the bureau has paid \$855,000 to settle lawsuits related to "neglect and mismanagement" of its jails. Another \$11 million in claims are pending, Devaney said.

Report says prison conditions deplorable

(AP) - Indian prisons are "a national disgrace" in which 11 people have died and hundreds have tried to kill themselves or escaped over the past three years, government officials say.

U.S. senators said they were deeply troubled by the report of the situation from the Interior Department's top watchdog and likened the jails to the U.S. military's mistreatment of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad.

Earl Devaney, the department's inspector general, painted a grim picture for the Senate Finance Committee. His report, capping a year of investigation, found at least 11 fatalities, 236 suicide attempts and 632 escapes since the Bush administration took office in January 2001.

The report's release coincided with the opening Tuesday of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian.

The Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs had 2,080 people in 70 Indian jails, detention centers and other correctional facilities as of mid-2002, according to the latest figures from the Justice Department. One jail in six held twice its recommended maximum of prisoners.

Problems chronicled by Devaney included mixing of juveniles with adults that resulted in the raping of a youth; poorly trained and inadequate numbers of staff; "countless" assaults on detention officers; and broken toilets, showers and sinks. His staff toured 27 jails and interviewed 150 BIA and tribal officials.

The report singled out the detention center at south-central Washington's Yakama Nation Reservation, where an inmate hung himself from a light fixture in June. The body of Ricky Owens Sampson was left hanging in his cell for at least five hours because the jail had just one staffer on duty that night.

In May, the Yakamas were forced to stop housing juveniles at their 50-bed jail in order to separate younger offenders from adults.

"I reject the notion that it's simply a matter of money. I think it's a matter of will," he said in answering senators' questions. Congress has increased BIA's yearly budget for law enforcement, including prisons and other detention facilities, to \$170 million from \$149 million three years ago. Another \$150 million for new construction has come through Justice Department grants since 1997, but the agency completed only two of 13 planned new jails.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, who chairs the Finance Committee, described the events in Iraq as a reminder that the way people are jailed is a measure of the United States' commitment to human rights.

"I think the IG has it exactly right when he says these jails are a national disgrace," Grassley said. "The IG notes that the conditions are often worse than those in Third World countries. Once again our government has failed to uphold its responsibilities to Native Americans."

Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., who requested the committee hearing, said he was shocked, dismayed and angry at findings

such as BIA's inability to show how it spent \$9.8 million of the \$11.4 million it received this year for opening new facilities. Grassley, however, called it "not a problem of this administration, or the previous administration. This is a problem of an entrenched bureaucracy that isn't getting the job done."

Dave Anderson, the Interior assistant secretary who heads the Bureau of Indian Affairs, said his agency was trying hard to correct long-standing problems. "We are making progress but recognize a lot more work needs to be done," he said.

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Parent advisory meeting Oct. 13

There will be a meeting of the Title VII Parent Advisory Committee starting at 5:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 13.

The meeting will be at the the Warm Springs Elementary School Library.

Ft. Still school reunion in Oct.

The 2004 Fort Still Indian School reunion is set for Friday and Saturday, Oct. 22-23, at the campus gym at Lawton, Okla.

Friday dinner will be at the Camanche Nation Senior Nutrition Center, from 4:30 to 6 p.m. Saturday events start at 9 a.m. and last throughout the day.

Raffle items and donations are appreciated, but your participation is what is really appreciated.

There will be a \$100 for the former student coming from the longest distance.

Contact for information are Tommy Johnson (580) 512-6311; Phyllis Bohay Hunter (405) 247-1558; Hazel or George Paul (505) 463-5395; Darlene French DeFoe (828) 497-7417; Richard or Pat Bread (405) 643-2770; Albert Pohocsucut (405) 257-2113.




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