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To the Honorable Senator Katrina Shealy:

My name is Jennifer Pipkins. I was employed as a Juvenile Specialist with the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice from September 2015 to November 2015. The following letter below was written after I separated from the agency because I did not feel safe or supported within the agency. I did not previously send this letter because I did not feel like it would make a difference in the overall state of the agency. I am sending it to you now after seeing the news reports of the recent events in the dormitories at DJJ. I would like to offer my advice and insight into this matter if it can help resolve some of the problems within the agency. If DJJ can resolve these issues I would like very much to be able to return to the agency and do the job I thought I was hired to do. Thank you for taking the time to read the following letter. Please feel free to contact me anytime to discuss this further.

The following is the complete text of my original letter.

“To whom it may concern:

My name is Jennifer Pipkins. I was hired by the SC Department of Juvenile Justice as a Juvenile Specialist. Before coming to DJJ I was a Correctional Officer in North Carolina for 6 years. Three of those years were at a close custody youth prison; the clientele being 19-26 year old males. When I interviewed for the DJJ position, I inquired about the frequency of assaults, and the protocol thereof. I was told that the juveniles housed at DJJ were mostly non-violent, so the need for restraints and personal protective items were not really necessary. I knew from past experience that incarcerated youth are extremely challenging and sometimes confrontational. I attended the four week basic training course for new Juvenile Correctional Officers and did quite well. I found the training to be very interesting and enjoyed the difference between this training and Basic Correctional Officer training for NCDOC. The class learned many non-violent crisis intervention methods, ethics, and military style marching for mass juvenile movement. Upon graduation from basic training new Juvenile Correctional Officers were assigned to a particular dorm, followed by two weeks of shadowing a veteran officer. My first night on shift I noticed a very stark difference from the Juveniles at DJJ than the youthful offenders at NCDOC. It seemed very apparent that the Juveniles were aware that Correctional staff were not legally allowed to use any physical restraint to protect themselves from assault. Because of this, there is a major safety concern for staff and juveniles. The second night on shift I accompanied another officer and four juveniles to the infirmary for morning medication. During the short van ride to medical one of the juveniles began masturbating inside of his sweat pants. I told him to get his hands out of his

pants. He immediately got confrontational as did another one of the juveniles, letting me know that if I didn't let them do what they wanted I would be assaulted. I filed a disciplinary report with my supervisor upon returning to the housing area. When I returned to work that evening the same juvenile was standing in the doorway of his pod and yelled to me "If you come into this pod I will beat all of the hair off of your head". I filed an addendum to my previous disciplinary and continued on to my assignment. I started asking my co-workers if they had ever been assaulted by one of the juveniles and most of them said yes. I started to realize that without the ability to use appropriate physical restraint or defend oneself if physically confronted, the job was much more dangerous than corrections.

The correctional setting only works when several factors are in place.

1. Justified use of force: If an inmate attempts to assault an officer, that officer has the right to defend him or herself with an equal amount of necessary force. This is why Correctional staff carry pepper spray, batons and handcuffs.
2. Backup or show of force: Assault is taken so seriously, that I have personally seen thirty officers respond to a situation involving a staff member.
3. Consequences: There is an appropriate level of justified use of force accompanied by a disciplinary report that can result in additional prison time, segregation and suspension of certain privileges.

Without implementing these factors, the prison system would be anarchy, and it would be an incredibly lethal place to work.

My fourth night on shift at DJJ I was involved in a riot. The shift began by our supervisor informing the staff that a key that unlocks all the dorm pods had come up missing. Until the key was found, the day shift was not allowed to leave the dorm. One dorm at a time (approximately 10 juveniles each) were told to exit the dorm pod into the courtyard, where staff would conduct a pat/frisk search of each juvenile. While the juveniles were out of the housing area night shift would do a thorough room search and search all common areas in the pod. After staff searched the housing area, the juveniles returned to the dorm and were visibly upset that they had been searched. My question is, why would an incarcerated juvenile think that a room search is violating their privacy? This is exactly the type of leniency that led to the riot. After failing to calm the juveniles down, they started threatening to assault staff. One juvenile took my radio out of my pocket and began saying profanities and yelling gang related language. At this point, Public Safety Officers had been notified and were on their way to the housing area. Since the day shift staff was still on duty, approximately 10 staff of varying rank entered the pod to try and calm the juveniles down. This just seemed to agitate the juveniles even more. Once the PSO's entered the pod, they gave the juveniles a direct order to fall back or they would be restrained. Two juveniles refused to fall back and so staff began to try and restrain the juveniles. It was at this point that everyone in the pod, excluding myself, started fighting. The PSO's finally managed to get two of the juveniles into handcuffs and began to escort them out of the housing area. Once they were removed, things gradually calmed down though the juveniles bragged that they had gotten the best of staff and that no one had better search their rooms again unless they wanted a repeat performance of another riot. As the evening progressed, I learned that the riot did not just happen in the pod I was assigned to, but all three pods in the housing area. When all was said and done, two staff members were assaulted. One was hit in the head with a broomstick, and I am not aware of what happened to the other staff but he did not return to work following the riot.

The following morning the building sergeant and I escorted 4 juveniles to the infirmary for morning meds. It seemed to me that there was still some residual anger from the evening before. When we arrived at the infirmary, which is a small trailer, one juvenile pushed another one and he fell into me, his head hitting my right knee cap. A few minutes later another juvenile at the dispensary window started screaming at the nurse on duty that he wanted his blood pressure medicine. The nurse told the juvenile that he was no longer prescribed that particular medicine and he went ballistic. It got so bad that the

working in. Basic training for new hires is costly and does not portray the realities of the job. Getting this out of the way in the very beginning will save the state money and will decrease the turnover rate.

4. The laws that are in place right now with respect to staff being legally allowed to defend themselves need to be altered to allow for staff safety. I know this is a sensitive area because these juveniles are under 18, but there are too many staff assaults because JCO's know that they can face criminal charges if they have to put their hands on a juvenile. Being in corrections for 6 years, I know there are always going to be staff who take things too far and each case should be examined to try and prevent this behavior by staff, but the fact remains; staff are afraid to defend themselves because of legal action and this is a very dangerous way to do business.
5. While conducting the interview process, if a potential employee asks if there are many physical altercations within this environment they need to say yes. When I asked that question, the new hire coordinator told me that it was very rare and I would be learning non-violent crisis intervention methods that had proven to be a successful alternative to physical restraint. Given my former experience, I found that very hard to believe, but I took the answer at face value because I had never worked in that particular environment. While I do feel like the answer was misleading, I understand the need for trying to gain as many new hires as possible to provide additional support, but retaining staff is not possible this way.
6. During basic training, much more time needs to be spent on unarmed self-defense. The training that was provided focused on using non-threatening body language during a potential assault. Although this by itself may be a productive way of deescalating certain types of situations, it hardly covers anything outside of that umbrella.

My time with DJJ was very brief and it was a hard decision to separate from the agency. I had high aspirations of what I wanted to accomplish on the job, including starting a gang task force that would train staff how to deal with alternatives for juveniles involved in gangs. I was never able to realize these goals due to the fact that my personal safety was at risk and the majority of each shift was focused on simply getting the juveniles to calm down to not assault each other or myself. My only hope upon being hired with DJJ was to help kids and I wish I could have stayed to do that, but with the present conditions it was just not possible. Please feel free to contact me anytime regarding any additional information you might need as I am happy to help any way I can. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. Change IS possible.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Pipkins"

CC: Matthew Stevens
Governor Nikki R. Haley
Kenneth James
The Honorable Kirkman Finlay, SC House Oversight Committee Chairman

nurse closed and locked the dispensary window in order to protect herself from the juvenile. At that time the Sergeant tried to calm the juvenile down and this seemed to make things more volatile because the juvenile kicked a hallway door very close to my head. The Sergeant called the PSO's again and they responded fairly quickly, meeting us in the parking lot. I was certain that the PSO would detain the juvenile and remove him from the premises so he could calm down. Instead, all four juveniles were completely unresponsive to the direct order to fall back. Instead of removing the juvenile that had caused the disturbance, the PSO's left and I had to drive them back to their housing area in the transport vehicle. I was very anxious and afraid that one or more of them would assault me on the drive back. The purpose of this letter is not to demonstrate that incarcerated juveniles are bad kids. Considering the background I have had in both juvenile and adult corrections, it is inconceivable to me why this behavior is not met with considerable consequence. The turnover rate for JCO's are unbelievably high. How can anyone expect an officer to handle volatile juvenile behavior without handcuffs, pepper spray and a show of force? In my 6 years of corrections, I used my pepper spray exactly one time. Inmates knew that putting their hands on staff and making threats would result in consequences that would directly affect their daily lives. If the system is unable to at the very least keep staff fairly safe by certain standards and rules, how can they even begin to do the work to rehabilitate a juvenile? The rules that are in place right now are not helping juveniles learn boundaries and consequences. It is teaching them that they don't have to listen to anyone because they know that officers cannot legally physically defend themselves without being sued or facing criminal charges or both. This is a very dangerous way of conducting business and is directly related to the turnover rate in the juvenile system. When I addressed these concerns to the staff coordinator, he showed me a catalog of items such as pepper spray, handcuffs etc. that he was trying to get ordered to deal with this problem. He told me that the director wanted to form a fast response team to come in and deal with situations such as riots or other disturbances. I was greatly encouraged by this but what is being done in the meantime to protect staff members from being assaulted? Also, the handcuffs and pepper spray would only be issued to the fast response team, not every staff member. How is that going to help a staff member, who is working by him or herself and has to deal with a volatile situation in real time? These are questions that need to be answered immediately for the safety and welfare of both staff and juveniles because things are not working the way they are right now. Right now a staff member is working in a pod by him or herself, with no handcuffs, no pepper spray, no right to defend him or herself, and no backup. They keep reporting to work because they have bills to pay, but they don't know whether they will go home in the same condition they arrived to work in. These people are someone's mother, brother, uncle, cousin, child. They show up every shift hoping that today won't be the day they get their teeth knocked out or get their arm broken by a juvenile. Or try and defend themselves and end up getting charged with assaulting a juvenile, followed by an expensive court case and possible prison time. Because their hands are tied they have to let things slide. A juvenile grabs their buttocks, pulls their hair, steals their pens, pushes them, or masturbates to them. They hope one day there will be enough staff so they don't have to do the job by themselves. That one day the turnover won't be so high so there is enough support if something does happen. But relief never comes and promises fall short. The system is failing.

There are several things that can be done, that need to be done to improve the safety of staff members and improve the rehabilitation of incarcerated juveniles.

1. Until the fast response team is organized, trained and in place; the Department of Juvenile Justice needs to start paying overtime to staff and so they can double up in each housing area pod.
2. Handcuffs and pepper spray need to be issued to each and every JCO, with special attention to retention techniques.
3. Before new hires are sent to training, they need to shadow a certified officer and spend at least two weeks in the housing areas so they can get a real sense of the environment they will be

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