Off the Rails: A Troubled Criminal Justice Agency

The Spring Valley Detention Center serves as the jail for all law enforcement agencies in Smith County. While county jails are usually operated by the county sheriff, the Spring Valley facility is under the general supervision of a commission consisting of the police chiefs of two cities, the sheriff, the district attorney, and a representative from the county board of supervisors. The commission usually restricts its involvement to establishing policy and hiring a warden to oversee operations.

Warden James Law has worked at the detention center for 22 years. For his first six years, Law was a corrections officer who worked a variety of assignments. Then he was promoted to sergeant and supervised a shift of 10-12 officers. Due to several retirements, Law became one of the people considered for the vacant warden’s position. Some members of the commission wanted to go outside the agency to bring in a fresh perspective and a modern ideology to the operation. Law’s long service convinced enough members to select him as the new warden.

In his first few months as warden, Law corrected some longstanding personnel and procedural issues and filled all the vacant officer positions. However, after a year on the job, his activity has slowed and he neglects to address festering issues. Employees rarely see him, and his communication to them usually comes in the form of terse emails. Upward communication has all but ceased. Officers comment that Law has gone ROD—retired on duty. Deputy Wardens and first line supervisors speculate that the warden is suffering from burnout or perhaps is ill.

Corrections officers are considering organizing a union to address the lack of communication and other problems that seem to be ignored. Two families have filed lawsuits over the deaths of inmates—one ruled a suicide and the other deemed an accidental fall.

While the detention center has never been progressive in improving its operation nor agile in responding to problems, it now suffers complete stagnation. Supervisors merely maintain the status quo and make decisions with reluctance. They go through the motions of day-to-day operations but feel inadequate to address personnel issues that were once handled by the warden. Mid- and upper-management (deputy wardens and special unit managers) feel their hands are tied without support from the distant warden.

A couple of employees have approached members of the commission informally. While some of the commission members have concerns about the situation, they are unsure what to do without specific allegations of misconduct against the warden.